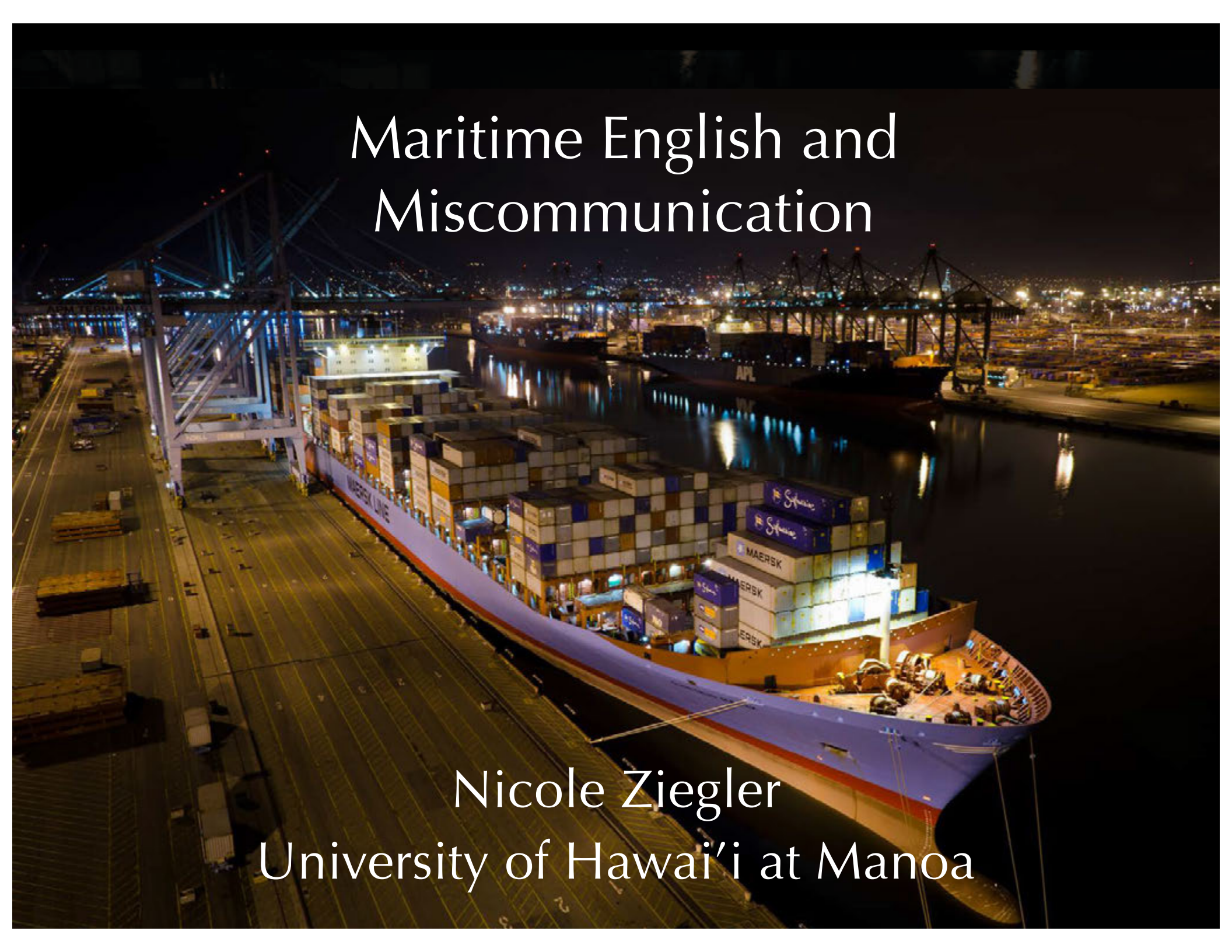# Maritime English and Miscommunication

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# Multilinguistic and Multicultural Crews

- Over 66% of all international ships have mixed nationality and multi-linguistic crews

- The common language spoken onboard vessels is unlikely to be the native language of the majority of crew.

# Source of Miscommunication

- 'Human element'
  - critical feature of all aspects of ship operation
  - found to be the cause of over 90% of incidents involving collisions and groundings

# Language and Miscommunication

- Communication failures cited as one of the major factors in all incidents at sea.

- Many communicative difficulties are a result of **cultural** and **pragmatic** differences as well as **linguistic** failures.

- Lack of standardization in language and clear format for communication contribute to these failures.

# Sources of Miscommunication

- Unique environment with specific communicative challenges and high stakes consequences
  - Social factors
    - fatigue, management interactions and company pressure
    - Isolation and alienation
  - Environmental factors
    - instrument reliability, engine noise, and VHF radio conditions
  - Cognitive factors
    - Cognitive load
    - High stress or panic can lead to language failure/miscomprehension

- Varying linguistic abilities affect crew interaction and team building

# Pragmatics

- Meaning in use, meaning in context
- Speaker meaning and utterance interpretation
- Abstract meaning → contextual meaning→ force of an utterance

- Examples: politeness, indirectness, mitigation, and illocutionary force

# Factors affecting politeness

- Cultural differences in the values assigned to distance, power, and imposition impact the speaker's selection of a specific strategy.

- Example
  – Chinese politeness behavior: although gender and age play a role in influencing the speaker's choice of politeness strategies, ranking hierarchy is the most important factor to consider in politeness behavior (Pan, 2000).

# *Cosco Busan*

- Data:
  - NTSB transcripts of conversations between pilot, master, and crew; pilot and VTS
  - English L1 pilot, Mandarin Chinese L1 master and crew

- Incident: *Cosco Busan* allided with the Delta tower of the Bay Bridge in San Francisco during foggy weather. Miscommunication between pilot and master, as well as lack of familiarity with on-board instruments, cited as cause

# Excerpt from *Cosco Busan*

08:21:56

1) Pilot Cota: **What are these ah red- red marks?**

2) Capt. Sun: **This is on bridge.**

3) Bridge on a light.

4) Pilot Cota: **Oh oh I couldn't figure out what the red light was red triangle was.**

# Politeness

- Interlocutors are inclined to speak differently to their social equals than those whose status is higher or lower in a given situation.

- Cota asks a direct question-"What are these ah red- red marks?"
  - The captain does not know the answer to the pilot's request-instead, he provides the information he believes the pilot wants to hear.

# Politeness

- Captain seeking to support information he believes the pilot already knows
  – Pilot, as expert, would know what the symbols meant (NTSB, 2007)
- Perceived hierarchy influences his hesitation to contradict the pilot, leading to non-face threatening language

# Indirectness

- Indirect request for additional information: "Oh oh I couldn't figure out what the red light was red triangle was"
  - Capt. Sun does not respond-he did not want to make the pilot "feel uncomfortable or unwelcome."
- Chinese politeness beliefs require that the speaker occupying the most important power or social position controls the floor.

# Excerpt from *Cosco Busan*

08:28:08

9) Pilot Cota: **This is the center of the bridge right?**

10) Capt. Sun:   **Yeah yeah**.

11) Pilot Cota:   Yeah.

# Pragmatic Failure

- **M/V Bright Field (Dec. 1996)**
  - Allided with the New Orleans River Walk
  - Engine failure
  - Pilot not alerted of danger by crew
    - pragmatic failure
  - Crew communications in Chinese

# Standard Marine Communication Phrases

- Prescriptive phraseology with reduced syntax and vocabulary for common and routine interactions .

- 3,000 phrases deemed essential for effective and safe communication practices at sea.

- Focused mainly on functional and technical aspects of Maritime English.

- Designed to provide standardization for ship to ship and ship to shore communications.

# SMCP: Potential challenges

- Linguistic: Lexical burden
  - special terminology and phrases
  - terms act not only as linguistic units but also as complex notions specific to specialized knowledge.
- Native English speakers receive *little to no* training in using and following the SMCP
- Although SMCP phrases use simple grammar, the illocutionary force behind these phrases and speech acts may be more difficult for learners to decipher.

# Parallels in Aviation Research

- Aviation research
    - Native English speakers less likely to use standard phraseology, and were insufficiently trained to understand when others used it.
    - Non-native speakers experience frustration with the American pilots' use of 'Plain English' and wordiness

    – Discourse between pilots and ATC
        - As quantity of information in a turn increased, the chance for problematic communication in the following turn also increased

# Implications

- Message Marker guidelines may contribute to miscommunication due to their ambiguity.
- Socio-pragmatic factors
  - Speakers may be influenced by power, social distance, and politeness.
- Hearers may not react appropriately to speakers' intent.
- Numerous opportunities for mismatch caused by cultural and pragmatic differences

# Solutions?

- Need for further investigations and greater involvement from a linguistics/pragmatics perspective
- Pragmatic awareness raising to improve intercultural communication
- Authentic practice for junior mariners to support linguistic and pragmatic development

# Targeted Training

- Focus on the *how* and *what* of the content that should be included in training
- Little attention has been paid to pragmatic and/or sociocultural causes of miscommunication
- High need for the language taught in classrooms to be the language needed for real-world interactions/tasks

# Next Steps

- Targeted Needs Analysis
  - Identify the unique linguistic, pragmatic, and task-based needs of stake-holders
  - Identify potential sources of miscommunication (e.g. bridge management, master/pilot exchange)
  - Proactively develop training materials and curriculum

# Findings so far…

- Lack of training and awareness of Maritime English
  - Target native and non-native English speakers
  - Target all bridge personnel
- Need for standardization in practices
  - Use of L1/ME on board
  - Port practices
  - SCMP
- Need for intercultural training of officers and pilots (in particular)

# Conclusions

- Multiple populations in need of task-based curriculum
  - "A task-based approach is 100% necessary"
- Bridge management tasks → key focus
- Cultural component
  - Requests, queries, suggestions
  - Raising concerns and disagreements
- Targeted needs analysis to identify and address communication in relevant contexts

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# THANK YOU