

## MISCOMMUNICATION: FAILING TO UNDERSTAND THOSE GI's ?

**Daniela NAGY**

“Henri Coanda” Air Force Academy, Brasov, Romania

**Abstract:** *The aim of this article is to draw attention to three types of miscommunication involved in the language used by the military. The social variables play an important part in failing to understand messages within the military environment. Among the common occurrences of miscommunication the use of acronyms, military jargon and euphemisms are mentioned.*

**Keywords:** *miscommunication, acronyms, jargon, euphemisms, communication breakdown.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Effective communication within the military environment is vital so long as the accomplishment of professional tasks is pursued. Nevertheless, instances of miscommunication, either among the military personnel or between military and non-military participants in the communicative act are frequent and of various types. Consideration will further be given to users of proficient English, both native and nonnative speakers, involved in social and professional encounters while utilizing the language of the military.

The dictionary definition of miscommunication [1] is “failure to communicate clearly”. One may find this definition insufficient, at least from the perspective of the word ‘clearly’, as it does not specify the amount of clarity necessary for successful communication, neither does it offer any hints with regard to the context in which such faulty communication occurs. In other words, there is still a large amount of confusion concerning whose fault it is in case of miscommunication: the sender’s, the receiver’s or both?

Susan M. Gass and Evangeline M. Varonis [2] have divided miscommunication into two subcategories: (1) misunderstanding and (2) incomplete understanding. They state that “a major differentiating factor between these two

types is whether or not the participants overtly recognize a problem and manifest a subsequent attempt at remediation.” In case of misunderstanding they do not, in the latter they do.

The military language, as a communicative instrument of individuals grouped under the same social category lends itself to misinterpretation, and subsequently, results into miscommunication, once it is inappropriately contextualized.

For illustration, reference will be further made to the use of military acronyms, jargon and doublespeak in verbal communication. In each of the above-mentioned semantic frameworks, the social variables as role relation, participants and context (of speech and situation) play important parts.

### 2. MILITARY ACROMYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

*Acronyms* are extensively used in the military environment and often a source of major headache for receivers of oral messages containing them. Given the social context of the military instruction, the use of acronyms by drill instructors may lead to communication breakdowns provided that the semantic abilities of the participants in the training are ignored or overestimated.

“*Gents, our POI (Plan of Instruction) for today includes a GI (General Inspection) by*

*the IIC (First in Command). It will be first thing in the morning, soon after your PT (Physical Training). Put on your BDUs (Battle Dress Uniforms) and make sure not to miss the roll call. Morning classes may be delayed, though (...)*"[3].

Assuming that participants in this morning briefing had been previously accommodated to the meanings of these acronyms, no misunderstandings of the message should have occurred. On the other side, if such messages had been transmitted in the absence of previous linguistic warning, the result of the inevitable lack of understanding or even the incomplete understanding of the plan of instruction (POI) would have been a failure in accomplishing the orders. It is worth mentioning, though, that inference may sometimes help understanding the missing or unclear bits of conversation, on condition that, at least two thirds of the whole message is clear to receivers.

In more elaborate conversational situations, incomplete understanding or misunderstanding may occur due to the unawareness of the participants. Military personnel belonging to various branches may, at one point, be gathered in an international coalition environment. In the absence of pre-training concerning the type of language to be used during their cooperation, work expertise may not be of great help. Take, for instance, the case of identical acronyms, used by different branches to designate different realities. Such acronyms will be made up of letters and/or numbers: A, stands for 'army' or 'air(force)', whereas in combination with numbers it may be an indicator of the chain of command: A3 (Operations Directorate). Furthermore, double or triple letters, in acronyms often refer to different matters: AA (aircraft assault/anti-aircraft), AAA (antiaircraft artillery/ arrival and assembly area/ assign alternate area) [4]. The misuse of acronyms of this type would result in confusion of the participants in the specific activity and ultimately, in a failure of understanding messages appropriately.

Roles of participants is a clear indicator of whether communication breakdowns have any chance of repair. Take, for example the case of orders issued by superiors to their

subordinates. In most circumstances, there is no chance for remediation, since a further request for explanation may be taken for disobeying a direct order: "*MEDEVAC (Medical Evacuation) operations in the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) will only occur at order, at 5:00 ZT (Zulu Time). The ETA (Estimated Time of Arrival) for crews is confidential for the moment.*"

Another instance of abbreviated language, although it is not considered acronymic is the use of clipped words. In verbal communication, it indicates the relationships between participants in the social activity: chief – subordinate, situation in which, conversation is often one-way (from the superior to the subordinate, without any chance of asking for clarification), or between equal ranks, which may indicate social solidarity and in which remediation of the conversation occurs frequently: "*Shun!(Attention) (At)Ease! P'rade! P'rade 'shun! (for parade at attention) Ajuwaya! (as you were)*" [5], "*Bro(brother), are you hap'(happy) in this place?*" "*Shu, shu, mo' than ha'.*"(sure, sure, more than happy) [3].

### 3. MILITARY JARGON

The phrase *military jargon* is more often used than military 'language'. For better or worse, the language of the military and of warfare in particular has greatly impacted the English language. In recent years, numerous dictionaries have been compiled in the attempt to ascertain and record the **often-ephemeral** vocabulary associated with specific wars – not only weapons terminology and technical jargon, but also the colorful slang that inevitably characterizes every war. The social variables are, again, worth mentioning, when trying to give justification for the 'coinage' of several categories of jargons. Like their fellow soldiers in Germany, Vietnam or Korea, those deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq have created a language all of their own, filled with black humor, cultural references and even with occasional crudity. Failing to understand these jargons will be only due to the absence of initial stimuli that have lead to their coinage and the authentic context that generated them.

Among the most used military jargons are those involving profession-related associations: air-force pilots use the term *aluminum cloud* for the F-14 Tomcat; *black Cadillacs* are often mentioned by army guys to ironically describe their footwear as a mode of transport; navy officers employed aboard submarines proudly call themselves *ducks*, and the *Dual Cool* is a phrase for a Marine, usually Recon or Force Recon, who has earned both the Scuba Bubble and Gold Jump Wings. Jargon involving gender differences or even sexual connotations may explain the social context in which such terms were coined: participants in the speech acts may have felt like showing superiority in relation with the opposite sex or making excuse for personal frustrations caused by the harsh war conditions. Accordingly, a *stealth woman* stands for a woman covered in black, as a veiled Iraqi woman, whereas *leg-spreaders* is derogatively used for a fighter pilot's insignia. Jargon using vocabulary that masks violence appears to play a dual role in the social context: on the one side, it is intended to sweeten the horrors of the front, on the other side, it may be used in order to hide the truth from receivers involved in the conversational act. Take, for example the funny reference to the Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm) as *Operation baby storm* or *Operation desert stork* due to anticipated high number of births, nine months after the return of troops from the Gulf, while '*laying down a carpet*' has nothing in common with domestic activities, its meaning being 'saturation bombing'.

#### 4. MILITARY EUPHEMISMS

At the other extreme, the *doublespeak* or the use of *euphemisms*, although considered a jargon category, its conversational intention is no longer to address members of the same social status but to deceive receivers of the messages sent by social participants often found in an official position: members of parliaments, chiefs of military offices etc. By doing so, they deny their social roles and hope to diminish or even hide the tough impact their messages may have upon their targeted audiences. Statistics relative to the military

environment have shown that military terminology that hides violence and danger under humorous or benign language indeed effectively alters perception. For instance, the euphemism '*collateral damage*' designating 'civilian casualties' is defined as damage that is incidental to the intended outcome. The term originated in the United States military, but it has since expanded into broader use. Initially the coined phrase was meant as an official excuse for damage caused in the urban areas, including loss of lives as a direct result of air bombing.

From the military environment, the term has been borrowed by other fields, to stand for unpredicted damage besides the targeted one. Nevertheless, if other fields than the military may not display hidden intentions of language control, the military intentionally fail to present the truth in order to diminish the social revolt, as civilians dislike being lied to with regard to the front realities. Otherwise, irony and even humor may be involved in the making-up of euphemisms related to the military while the hidden intention of distorting reality is still preserved. In such phrases as "*an uncontrolled contact with the ground*", in relation to an air crash, "*runaway denial device*", meaning a bomb that scatters clusters of cratering bombs over a wide area to destroy air base runaways, "*coercive potential*" referring to the military power, the social implication consists of the fact that even if meaning is purposely distorted, the impact of the message upon the hearers is lessened.

From the sociolinguistic perspective, the use of euphemisms, together with the other two linguistic devices – acronyms and jargon may justify the individuals' need to convey social meanings in the specific context of the military life. The social functions of the language deriving from military realities provide a wealth of information about the way the language works, as well as about the social relationships within the military community.

#### 5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the major challenge for addressing the impact of warfare and military

terminology on the English language is one of scope.

Military terminology is incredibly flexible. Not only are different military groups and, indeed, different wars characterized by particular vocabularies, military terminology also infiltrates the language of civilians and, conversely, is impacted by a number of specialized civilian vocabularies. Failures in understanding correctly the meaning of the message may have a variety of reasons, out of which, the social nature of the language plays an extremely important part.

### REFERENCES

1. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary: [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/miscommunication](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/miscommunication);
2. Gass, S.M., Varonis, E.M., *Miscommunication in Nonnative Speaker Discourse*, in Coupland, N., Giles, H., Wiemann, J.M. (eds), „*Miscommunication*” and *problematic talk*, Newbury Park, Sage Publications, 1991;
3. cited from class material provided by the Defense Language Institute, Lackland

AFB, San Antonio, Texas. Handouts distributed during an Advanced Language Proficiency Skills course, in 2007;

4. The Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms (short title: Joint Pub 1-02 or JP 1-02), 12 April 2001 (As Amended Through 30 May 2008);
5. *Breakthrough*, student Audio CD, unit 4. The British Council's Peacekeeping English Project (PEP), Published by the Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic; Military Information and Service Agency (AVIS), march 2005.

**Note:** \*GI stands for Government Issue. This reverts to military law, which says that, all military personnel, and also the bunks they sleep in, the clothes they wear, and the guns they carry, are the property of the Government. What started as a common joke among soldiers that they were, in fact, Government issued military property, became the standard ready reference. They were, quite simply, issued by the government and, therefore, became Government Issues.