

## Military Language and Sexual Language

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**Military Language and Sexual Language:** *The paper analyses the relation between Military English as a special type of English for specific purposes with its unique linguistic characteristics on one hand and sexual language on the other, as well as the reasons for sexualising military speech (chants and rhymes in particular) with lots of derogatory and tabooed slang words. Numerous examples prove the shared masculine bond between military weaponry and sexual intercourse and the impact of military terms on general language discourse.*

**Key words:** *Military English, terminology, sexual language, slang, taboo.*

### INTRODUCTION: LINGUISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF MILITARY ENGLISH

When investigating aspects of the language of the military as a special type of English for specific purposes (ESP) or providing lists/glossaries with military terms or slang words, English speaking scholars use, often interchangeably, the meta-terms *military language, military terminology, military slang, military lingo, military jargon, military argot, soldier's language, army language* and some more to describe the characteristics of the language, used by military personnel and organizations. This is to prove that very often military vocabulary is associated with slang and jargon which usually contain taboos and slang words and expressions to express different aspects of the harsh and sometimes brutal military reality. According to some researchers *military terminology*, which constitutes the heart of military language, can be described as a professional jargon, overloaded with peculiar and artificial terms, which is constantly enlarged with neologisms for new weapons systems and types of military operations, reflecting the new inventions and concepts. The periphery of military language is occupied by the *military slang* defined as "a set of colloquial terms which are unique to or which originated with military personnel. They are often abbreviations or derivatives of the NATO Phonetic Alphabet, or otherwise incorporating aspects of formal military concepts and terms. Military slang is also used to reinforce the (usually friendly) inter-service rivalries."<sup>1</sup>

The most important ingredient of the Military Language as a type of ESP is military terminology because terminology is that part of linguistics which describes the lexicon of special languages. In the broadest sense, military terminology includes terms for designating military organizations, personnel, military ranks and hierarchy, armament and military equipment, military systems, types of military activities, tasks and operations, which are defined in doctrines, strategies, manuals, guides, orders and similar specialized military/defence national and international documents.

The meta-term *Military English* labels the professional community of its users and emphasizes their professional expertise, because it is the ability to understand and use specific language that determines the membership in professional communities. Some of the most important characteristics of Military English are: linguistic forms (terms) of military language are understood and applied only by the military; most of the terms are monosemous in a given context so that no misinterpretation and fatal mistakes are possible in professional communication; military language reflects the mindset and the social activities of the professionals who use it.

There are not many detailed analyses of the linguistic characteristics of Military English and the reason for this is underlined in the book of Edith Disler *Language and Gender in the Military*: "Linguistic research is rare in the military environment, probably due to problems of access. [...] Military members are trained, for example, through classroom discourse, "hands-on" instruction, and by written texts such as technical orders, operating instructions, and checklists. [...] Even despite the differences among the individual armed

<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Appendix:Glossary\\_of\\_military\\_slang](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Appendix:Glossary_of_military_slang)

services - Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and Air Force - the similarities in training and customs are enough to provide clear intertextual references over time. In all services, for example, new recruits learn "basic responses" such as "yes, sir," "no, sir," "no excuse, sir," and, "I do not understand the question, sir." In fact, in a case of almost "metaintertextuality," recruits are only allowed to use those basic responses and must, despite the frustration, make all answers conform to this small repertoire" [2]. The same researcher underlines that "the military speaks its "own language" [2].

One of the problems of Military English is that each military service has its own jargon, acronyms, and phrases. "Not only do different services use different terms; sometimes the same word can mean different things to different services" [1]. This fact can pose serious problems during joint operations. That is the reason each military document to be accompanied with a glossary of the terms and abbreviations used in it.

The following example is interesting and a little bit humorous proof of the unique language of each military service. When given the order to *secure a building*, the Navy personnel would, following a checklist written on a clipboard, unplug the equipment, turn off the lights, lock the doors, and depart. Army personnel would follow a checklist written in a notebook. They would occupy the building, so that no one could enter, and nothing could leave. In execution of the same instructions for *securing a building* and following a plan written on the palm of their hands, Marines would assault the building, capture it by close combat, and defend it with suppressive fire. The Air Force, on the other hand, following a protocol printed on a portable computer, would *secure a building* by taking out a three-year lease on it, with an option to buy.<sup>2</sup>

The reasons for the mismatching definitions of the same English military terms in different services are sought in the longstanding rivalries between military subgroups. Wayne Silkett gives as an example of the rivalry between military services the term *infantry*, which was created to be a derogatory name of foot soldiers:

"While details are obscure of the first use of *infant* to describe foot soldiers, the term was probably coined by cavalymen as one of abuse. [...] Since early cavalymen (who, notably, were associated with chivalry, nobility, knights, and the aristocracy) rode on horseback, they could easily create the primitive analogy that since infantry could move only at a foot's pace and could not carry their own baggage and supplies to last any length of time, therefore cavalry equated to adult, the foot soldier to infant" [5].

### MILITARY ENGLISH AND SEXUAL LANGUAGE

One of the most prominent linguistic characteristic of Military English which is in the focus of the present research is its **reference to sex**. Adele Wilson states: "Military language, especially slang, rhymes, and chants, are overtly marked by references to sex" [7]. Unlike the official (usually written) military terminology which is meant to represent the military to the outside, *military speech* is loaded with metaphoric usage of general words to express insulting and derogatory attitude towards women in general and servicewomen in particular. The reasons can be explained with the outdated sexist macho-style thinking of predominantly male military community and the 're-masculinisation of America' as Susan Jeffords promptly characterises the cultural processes in the 1980s after the Vietnam War [3].

There are lots of military slang words and abbreviations which are disrespectful and disparaging to servicewomen, and they all of them contain associations with sex, e.g. *walking mattress* (US) 'a woman Marine', *barracks rat* or *shack rat* (Canada) 'servicewoman who engages in sexual relations with others in a housing area'; *Navy issue ass* (US) 'a female Navy member (with reference to their reputation of having large posteriors)'; *BAM* (US) *Broad Assed Marine* 'a female Marine'; *split* < short for *split-ass*

<sup>2</sup> *Different Military Services Don't Speak the Same Language.*  
<http://www.combat.ws/S4/MILTERMS/SAMELANG.HTM>

(Canada) derog. reference to early female members of the Navy; *desert queen* (US) 'a promiscuous woman who sleeps around while at a deployed location'; *dairy queen* (US) 'a promiscuous overweight woman who sleeps around while at a deployed location'; *desert fox* 'a female soldier who is considered more attractive because she has moved down range'; *dorm hoe* or *dorm slut* (US Air Force) 'a female who is known for her promiscuity around dormitories and lodging facilities'; *sea donkey* or *sea hag* 'a female sailor'; *shave-tail* (US) 'a Second Lieutenant, or a female service member'; *split tail* (US Navy and Marine Corps) derog. reference to any female, etc.

In her article, *Living a Life of Sex and Danger: Women, Warfare, and Sex in Military Folk Rhymes*, Susanna Trnka stresses that "Military folk rhymes are full of images of women and sex. Whether boasting of battles they have won or of women they have met, one of the prevailing themes in soldiers' songs and rhymes is sexuality." She justifies her statement by analyzing soldiers' attitude towards women and towards their rifle in military chants. [6] A review of online collections of this type of military language gives us plenty of examples<sup>3</sup>:

"I wish all the ladies were holes in the road,/ And I was a dump truck I'd fill 'em with my load,/ Chorus: Hey, hey baba-reeba (2)/ I wish all the ladies were bricks in a pile,/ And I was a mason I'd lay 'em all in style,/ Ch.: .../ I wish all the ladies were boats on the ocean,/ And I was a big wave I'd set 'em all in motion..."

According to Trnka "women and weapons are often used to symbolize each other." The examples for this statement can be found in the following cadences:

*Oh Lord Cadence*: "Used to date, used to date a beauty queen,/ Now I'm dating, now I date my M-16."

"They took away my TV/ Got me doing I.T./ Tiffy Tiffy Tiffy Lou/ I love my rifle more than you/ Used to be my beauty queen/ now I love my M16./ If I die in a combat zone/ Box me up and ship me home."

Similarly, another cadence also shows the bond between the soldier and his rifle:

"Tell my momma I did my best,/ Bury me in the leaning rest./ With my weapon upside my head,/ I'm gonna rock the living dead."

There is a comparison of a lady with an F-16 fighter in the cadence *Irene, Irene*:

"Irene, Irene, she's one of the best, / and every night I give er' the test, [...] Irene, Irene, she's the best in the land, / she's an F-16 in the fighter command."

As Trnka underlines: "there are the songs and rhymes that explicitly link images of sex with joining the army or with killing itself". She exemplifies this statement with one of the most popular military chants from boot camps: "This is my rifle, / This is my gun. / This is for killing / This is for fun," in which the gun is associated with a phallus. The author stresses that the chant "conveys a powerful, if more subtle, equation between war and sex. [...] By equating the penis with a 'gun', the rhyme functions to acculturate the military recruit into a frame of mind that equates sex with violence, and killing with 'manhood'. [...] This is how, according to the rhyme, killing is like sex: killing is fun." [6]

Phallic-like weapons are used as metaphors for the penis: *gun, weapon, bayonet, bazooka, bow, cannon, arrow, guided missile, lance, pike, pistol, saber, spear, sword, and love truncheon*. We can add the following examples of military slang words as a proof of the psychological association of military weaponry with sexual attributes or intercourse on a linguistic level of analysis: *destroyer* '1. erotic girl, 2. large penis'; *wife* (Singapore) 'soldier's rifle'; *clearing barrel* (derog.) 'a promiscuous female soldier'; *regimental groundsheet* (Canada, pejorative) 'a promiscuous female soldier ('groundsheet' is a term for a tarpaulin-like sheet used either for shelter or, protection from wet or cold ground; 'regimental', in this case, refers to scope of usage); *ground sheet* (Canada) '1. a

<sup>3</sup> Examples are taken from <http://cocojams.com/content/military-cadences-other-cadences> and <https://www.vetfriends.com/cadences/index.cfm>

rubberized tarpaulin, used as a half-shelter 2. a female who sleeps around'; *clusterfuck* a slang term to describe the effect of artillery or cluster bombs and a disastrous situation that results from the cumulative errors of several people or groups; *cock holster* (US) 'one's mouth, as in "Everybody, shut your cock holsters and listen up"'; *cockpit* (US, derog.) 'a promiscuous female aircrew, generally Army or Marine referring to Air Force female crew members', etc.

All of the above examples prove the old-fashioned, but still powerful and common values of the male English speaking military towards the servicewomen. In her study, Edith Disler considers the interrelation of power, gender dynamics, language and ideology using the techniques of discourse analysis and gives plenty of examples of military female and male talks to exemplify the differences between the "language" of servicewomen and men to conclude that language has served to preserve "domination" of the males over females. "Outdated notions regarding the twenty-first-century military serve to perpetuate bias and bigotry" [2]. Despite the fact that servicewomen were 10 percent of the US forces deployed in the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, as Disler points out "the American military and the iconic soldier, sailor, and marine form an image and ideal of masculinity that pervades the American culture. Even currently, during the second war in Iraq, commentators refer to "bringing our boys home," clearly framing the military as an endeavour of masculinity and youth and, consequently, rendering women's participation in the conflict relatively invisible. [...] Opponents of women in the military or women in combat make much of their opinion that Americans do not want to see women "coming home in body bags" - such imagery plays upon the traditional notion that women, like children, should be protected, not protecting, or that women should be subject to the authority of men, not asserting authority over them as a militarily high-ranking female" [2].

The idea that "women should be subject to the authority of men" reflects the shared masculine identity that military men are superior to women which in turn leads to sexualising military language.

The most tabooed f\*\*\* word is used frequently by the military not only alone with its main meaning 'to have sexual intercourse', and as a noun or verb in various phrases to express annoyance, contempt, or impatience, but also in increasing number of military abbreviations from WWII until present days which serve as a relief valve from the accumulated stress of the military activities. Some of them are collected by Lawrence Paros, and others can be consulted in the online *Dictionary of the F- Word*<sup>4</sup>: *SNAFU* 'Situation Normal, All Fucked Up', *COMMFU* 'a Complete Monumental Military F\*\*k-Up', *FUBAR* 'F\*\*ked Up Beyond Recognition', *FUBB* 'F\*\*ked Up Beyond Belief', *FUMTU* 'F\*\*ked Up More Than Usual', *IMFU* 'Immense Military F\*\*k-up', *SAMFU* 'Self Adjusting Military F\*\*k-Ups', *TARFU* 'Things Are Really F\*\*ked Up' or *TAFUBAR* 'Things Are F\*\*ked Up Beyond All Recognition', *FUJIGMO* 'Fuck You, Jack, I've Got My Orders', etc.

Not only military language is sexualised, but also sexual language is militarised. General language abounds with expressions in which a military term is used to denote a person or activity by sexual references and images: *sex bomb* 'a woman who is very sexually attractive', *flesh bombs* 'women's breasts', *bombshell* 'a very attractive woman', *cruiser* '1. a large fast warship smaller than a battleship and larger than a destroyer (from 1670s); 2. one who cruises for sex partners (from 1903, in later use mostly of homosexuals); *to hit on* 'to make sexual advances towards', *to bang the drum and to take down* 'of a male, to masturbate'; *withdrawal method* 'a contraceptive technique', *to sink the soldier* 'to copulate'; *to leap over the sword* is defined by Captain Francis Grose in his *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue from 1811*<sup>5</sup> as an ancient ceremonial said to constitute a military marriage', etc.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.sex-lexis.com/F-Word-Dictionary>

<sup>5</sup> Captain Francis Grose *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*. 1811.

Accessible online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5402/pg5402.html>

The last group of examples includes slang expressions for sexual intercourse from Shakespearean times to modern days, included in the online *Dictionary of Sexual Terms*<sup>6</sup>. All of them contain military terms: *sheath the sword to the hilt* a Shakespearean metaphor; *chamber combat*: (or *chamber-games*) an Elizabethan euphemism for sexual intercourse; *throw one's dagger* 'to copulate, said of and by males, now archaic'; *bayonet drill* (obsolete) 'copulation'; *break a lance with* 'of a male, to copulate until ejaculation'; *bush patrol* 'an oblique reference to sexual intercourse'; *assault with a friendly weapon* (colloq.) 'a phrase, said of and by males, for sexual intercourse'; *a straight shot* 'an act of copulation without protection or contraception'; *take a turn on Shooters Hill* 'to have sexual intercourse with a woman'; *zig-zig* 'a WWII coinage for sexual intercourse'.

### CONCLUSION

Military language is a unique type of specialized language because it has a powerful impact on general language. Many military terms are determinologised and become general words with a slight change in meaning, e.g. *blast* 1. (mil.) an explosion or violent detonation; 2. an enjoyably exciting experience, occasion, or event "I had a *blast*"; *war* 1. (mil.) a state of armed conflict between different countries or different groups within a country; 2. a sustained campaign against an undesirable situation or activity: "a *war* against disease", etc.

As the present research proves, some military terms are used as part of expressions with sexual references. The equation of military language and sexuality is extremely influential in the general (civilian) context which results in coinage of numerous metaphoric slang expressions that are insulting and derogatory to women and echo the outdated ideology of masculine superiority manifested in the traditional military discourse.

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**Докладът е рецензиран.**

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.sex-lexis.com>