DOUBLESPEAK OR MILITARY SLANG – PROOF OF CULTURAL BACKGROUND?

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Abstract: *Cultural background holds responsibility for the type of communication it generates. Communication represents all intrinsic connections between the goals and the means employed by a transmitter of a message. Within a specific cultural space, created by a society and relevant for the value system of a community, communication displays a variety of behaviors: it can, on the one hand enhance the relationship between an individual and language; on the other hand, it can alter their relationship, and, ultimately, communication can annul any connection between the two. In a binary system characterized by acquisition and innateness, the cultural trait displays its multiple meanings, whereas the two characteristics initiate a reciprocal determination. As culture is a guarantee of the functionality of a behavior, the triumph of an organization, such as the military one, depends on communication, largely. Within military environments, and by expansion, within military communities, language, in general, and discourse, in particular, displays peculiar manifestations dictated by a series of external and internal factors. These factors contribute to a successful or distorted communication. Among the external factors, we can include global or local social, economic and political realities. Internal factors incorporate interpersonal relationships, organizational structures' policies and shared values. The aim of the present paper is to illustrate how the cultural background is reflected by doublespeak and military slang. A case study will further confirm the initial assumption that cultural background influences language.*

Keywords: *language, communication, culture, community discourse, doublespeak, slang*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language and society are two inseparable phenomena as they are not mutually exclusive. Different social settings require different linguistic codes for their expression. As far as culture's relationships with language and discourse are concerned, we shall start by mentioning two major structuralist directions, which provide definitions for *language* and *speech*. A first 'equation' was subjected to debate after the 1916's publication of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*: **language = speech – speaking** (1), more accurately: "*Avoiding sterile word definitions, within the total phenomenon represented by speech we first singled out two parts: language and speaking. Language is speech less speaking. It is the whole set of linguistic habits which allow an individual to understand and to be understood*" (Saussure, 1959:77). Considering language to be a social product, equally a *form* and a *non-substance*, the eminent Swiss professor stresses the necessity of analyzing the relationships between the constitutive elements of language. The second equation, pertaining to the French linguist Émile Benveniste is based on the same Saussurean distinction between language and speech, yet it claims that *language* is perceived as a whole of structures belonging equally to a community and to the individual, whereas *speech* is developed within a language. According to Benveniste, language is produced by a culture that, in its turn, is conditioned by the speech incorporated within language: "*Culture is defined as a very complex pattern of representations, organized by a code of relationships and values traditions, religion, laws, politics, ethics, arts-*

everything which man, no matter where he is born, will be steeped in within his deepest consciousness and which will direct his behavior in all forms of his activity; what is this then if not a universe of symbols integrated into a specific structure which language reveals and transmits?" (Benveniste, 1971:26). Benveniste considers that man assimilates culture, perpetuates it and transmits it through language, while discourse is incorporated within speech, in an equation re-written by Caune (2000:28) as **language = logos (discourse + sense)** (2). Without subscribing to the already mentioned Saussurean structuralism, the French researcher Patrick Charaudeau comes closer to equation (1), yet his perspective requires clarification. Starting from interrogations regarding social identity and/or cultural identity of an individual, Patrick Charaudeau sets discourse in the proximity of the presupposed identity role of language. The simple consideration of language as a depository and transmitter of culture values dissatisfies Charaudeau, since language relationships with identity imply an analysis of the use- of -language relationships with identity. From this viewpoint, any attempt of explaining cultural values by appealing to language is insufficient. Consequently, Charaudeau (2001:343) sets another equation, **discourse = language + speech** (3), through which he proves that the only institution capable of transmitting cultural values is discourse. Moreover, he strengthens his proof by mentioning that no one changes one's culture when speaking in a foreign language because speaking a language does not equal belonging to a culture. Rather, cultural habits materialize speech acts. This concept leads to a redefinition of communities: we should speak of discourse communities rather than speech communities.

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Among the external factors, we can include global or local social, economic and political realities. Internal factors incorporate interpersonal relationships, organizational structures' policies and shared values. The conceptual clarification of language versus cultural background of a community/society should sustain the more applicative aspects of discursive materialization of speeches in relation with the military environment. Consequently, we will further attempt to illustrate two particular instances in which cultural background is revealed by means of language: *doublespeak* and *military slang*.

2. DOUBLESPEAK

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 7th edition*, **doublespeak** (also **doubletalk**) is *"language that is intended to make people believe something that is not true, or that can be understood in two different ways"* (2005:458).

The word *doublespeak* was first mentioned in the early 1950s. It was often incorrectly attributed to George Orwell and his dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The truth is that the word does never appear in that novel. Nevertheless, Orwell did invent **Newspeak**, **Oldspeak**, **duckspeak** (speaking from the throat without thinking 'like a duck') and **doublethink** (holding "...simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them..."). Doublespeak may be considered, in Orwell's lexicography, as the B vocabulary of Newspeak, words "deliberately constructed for political purposes: words, that is to say, which not only had in every case a political implication, but were intended to impose a desirable mental attitude upon the person using them."

The connection between the military and politics resides in the subordination of the armed forces to a state's government, parliament and president. Hence, the 'military' community follows state policies that reflect its role within the larger social and cultural context. The military language, pertaining to specialized scientific languages, displays a

denotative feature, aiming at high clarity and lack of redundance, for an efficient communication. In opposition to this reality, the political language bears a connotative load, because its main purpose is to persuade and/or manipulate. From 'manipulation' to 'lies' the distance is not far. *"The massive use of euphemisms is one of the most criticized features of the political language, to the extent in which political discourse can easily slide into lying. Euphemism consists of a deliberate replacement, by the locator, of a linguistic phrase holding negative meaning or connotation with another phrase, either neutral or positive, so as the occurrence of a negative effect might be avoided"* (Zafiu: 2007). By means of euphemisms, perceived as conversational strategy, both comforting the interlocutor and the self-protection of the locator are acquired. Military and political realities in Romania, during the communist oppression could never illustrate better the Orwellian slogans attributed to the Ministry of Truth (Minitrue): "War is peace"; "Freedom is slavery"; "Ignorance is strength". Such instances of doublespeak,, in reference to the military, may be interpreted as "We shall fight the class enemy" (propaganda against any capitalistic values = enemy of the working class, the verb 'fight', normally associated with a military engagement holding metaphorical meaning); "Freedom of opinion is slavery" (military virtues had to be in absolute agreement with authoritarian leadership); "Lack of education is strength" (the more illiterate a military leader was, the greater was his possibility to be promoted, due to the fact that his ignorance ensured unconditioned subordination to the "Supreme Leader" = dictator). The most common stylistic devices through which "wooden language" (Zafiu: 2007, p.43) displayed its power-related connotations during the totalitarian regime are metaphor, metonymy and word clipping. Metaphors used during communist years are mainly clichés, associated with the idea of 'patriotism' and sending to the importance and unsurpassed qualities of the 'supreme leader'. Thus, "dignified hero" (not in the military

acceptance of the term 'hero'), "brave defender of native land" (by means of indoctrination, not by military force) or "our onward march" (towards communist ideologies) come to prove the attitude of servile followers of a worthless dictator. Metonymy, on the other side, impregnates in language similar relationships between the significant and the signified: "The Great Father", "The Liberator", "The Hero". A special mentioning of a military reality was provided by the word *diribau* (originally *derubau),* formed by clipping of De(utschland) - Ru(mänien) - Bau(ern), in reference to a German-Romanian constructions company. The meaning of the word, according to Anca and George Volceanov's *Dictionary of Romanian Slang and Colloquial Expressions* (1998) was: 1. *"disciplinary battallion"*; 2. *"forced labor"*. Both meanings hold sense: during communist era, military personnel opposing the communist ideology were forced into 'labor camps'.

After the fall of communism, military language was not cured from doublespeak symptoms. The difference was set by the relationships of language with the Romanian cultural background. Added to these, Romania's armed forces being integrated within multinational or international military organizations, the language displayed a 'multinational' behavior: the national signified often resembled or even coincided with other nations' signified. Accordingly, the previous "wooden language" of the military was replaced by a "freedom of speech", where parody, irony and sarcasm appear to be characteristics of the conative function of the language. Doublespeak, achieved through a variety of stylistic devices, still deceits the receiver, although the speaker may be cognizant of military concepts. Euphemisms such as 'militant' (= terrorist), 'cold war' (=operations other than war), 'classified-unclassified military documents' (=secret), 'smart bomb' (=advanced technology used for missiles) 'collateral damage' (=civilian casualties), 'capital punishment' (=death sentence) and euphemistic metonymies –

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'John Wayne'/ 'Rambo'/ 'G.I. Joe/ Jane' (=soldiers) illustrate military cultural biases.

A reverse phenomenon initiated by the so-called 'military-flavored' doublespeak appears to be the infiltration of military-related words and phrase into 'civilian' discourse community. The specialized military terms show a great mobility as they adapt to new contexts easily, within both the military and the general, an unexpected situation by 'come as a bombshell' or someone's unawareness as 'off-guard'. In all instance, cultural background prevails. This prevalence strengthens once more Charaudeau's hypothesis that culture creates language.

3. MILITARY SLANG

Should doublespeak hold a degree of manifested formality, provided by the power relation it entails, military slang manifests a wide range of informality, from neutral references to sexist, racist or vulgar connotation. The Oxford Dictionary definition of slang is "very informal words and expressions that are more common in spoken language, especially used by a particular group of people, for example children, criminals, soldiers, etc." (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 7th edition*: 2005:1433). Additionally, by reiterating the assumption of cultural background generating language and communication between a community's members being possible through language, we should have a look at the military environment in itself. On a regular basis, the armed forces are deployed to military bases and garrisons, separated from the civilian segment of society. For the army's functional necessities, community is more powerfully recognized, to the detriment of its individuals. "*Within military culture, an individual becomes an instrument serving the group's needs. It is expected from a soldier to give up his freedom and, should the case be, sacrifice his life for the benefit of a collective goal to which he may not adhere*" (Zulean: 2005) page 12. Moreover, morale and group cohesion represent major ingredients for a soldier's motivation in combat, as well as they are

included in soldiers' training and education. Discipline implies that the military organization's members may be forced to put aside their individual interests, in favor of collective targets. Lack of motivation or recognition of personal values, a sense of frustration caused by professional hardships or a lesser implication in the rigid context of the professionalized army may result in language 'coding' that aims at not being understood by superiors or at obtaining a group's recognition as a distinct member. Again, cultural backgrounds in which language used by soldiers is achieved determine the variety of slang occurrences. During the communist years, military slang used to be the perfect embodiment of the force by which the military community communicated itself: a community based on power relationships, in which social values were often distorted and denaturized. The level of education of the component members of the community or its scarce presence was another factor contributing to military slang. The connotative function of the language was never more powerful than under the oppressive management of communists. Different from doublespeak, the military slang does not deceit; it simply denies access to intruders. Sarcasm, irony and derogation are but some of the manners in which slang manifest itself. Metaphor, metonymy and the derived acronymic usages of professional jargons are the most common stylistic devices associated with slang. Military ranks, during conscription time were not always a proof of one's superiority or inferiority. 'APV' (Romanian acronym for "*armata pe viata*" = *employed in the armed forces*), "Colonel calcat de tanc" ("*colonel run over by a tank", in reference to the military insignia of a Master Chief Sergeant (Non-commissioned officer)composed of three wide stripes, as compared to a genuine colonel's insignia consisting of three thin stripes*). Conscription caused a lot of trouble to either regular soldiers or reduced-service ones (TR: Romanian "*termen redus*", reduced service granted to soldiers who had already been admitted to universities). Countdown of days to spend in the military was often referred to as AMR

(Romanian "*au mai ramas*" for the similar English meaning of "(*ten days*)... *and a wake up*". Similarly, "*72s and 96s*" carried out the connotation of "*acquainted time given to a military member for liberty on holidays or special occasions and based on hours*" common for both Romanian and foreign military environments. Reference to members of the military community by means of 'genitalia words' used to be and still is a depreciatory way to show disrespect or denial of authority. Items of clothing as part of the compulsorily to be worn attire used to include a multitude of slang references in the past, due to the fact that the fabric the military uniform was made of was either uncomfortable or created the impression of intended depersonalization of individuals. Military base-life, reflected by sleeping conditions, dining facilities or food supplied led to such slangy terms as "*prison or inlife*" – derivative from the jail occupants, called "*inmates*", bunk-beds were ironically defined as "*canned beds*", sleeping bags were "*farting bags*", the mess hall, a term already bearing pejorative meaning, turned into "*pigstry*", while food served there was "*swine food*". The years that followed communism had different impacts on the evolution of military slang. Conscription was abolished and the existence of a professionalized army, based on volunteering has diminished or even eradicated some of the consecrated slang terms in reference to the military. Parody of contemporary events, social or cultural now is a trait of military language. For example, unprofessional or immoral behavior in subordinates-superiors relationships is now illustrated by metonymic replacement of a social phenomenon with the very author of the abnormal behavior. For generalization sake, there are instances where a Romanian extremely wide spread or common name turns into a significant of a class. Another observable fact is that of parodying, for the sake of mockery of televised shows' names, while attributing them military connotations. "*Dancing for a leave*" comes from a popular entertainment show "*Dancing for You*", in which dancers compete for raising funds to be used for charity. "Big

Brother" does not refers to Orwell's communist party, but to a show where competitors are secluded from society and required to simulate normal behavior as in real life. The military meaning of "Big Brother" is of either "*commanding officer*", or senior *ranks*.

In conclusion, it is obvious that the existence of different cultural habits is replicated by military pejorative uses of terms and concepts and that any change in the cultural backgrounds may give birth to or annul other meanings.

4. CASE STUDY

Starting from the hypothesis that cultural background of a specific military community affects language and speech, we conducted a survey on a sample of 112- second –year-cadets of the Air force Academy. The composition of the research sample was: 14 female students and 98 male students, aged between 20 and 26 years old. Out of the 112 students, 48 had graduated from military high-schools, 6 female graduates and 42 male graduates. There were eight distinct specialization categories including fighter pilots, helicopter pilots for Police force and Naval force, staff officers subordinated to the Ministry of National Defense, and the Ministry of Administration and Interior, radar officers, electronic warfare officers, artillery and anti-air defense, trained to serve with the Land Forces, and surface-to-air missiles. The survey was conducted on specialized groups, in turn and it was conceived as an unstructured questionnaire, with open -ended questions. Respondents were asked to indicate, under the protection of anonymity, as many euphemisms and slang terms they could relate to the seven indicated topics: "*personal apartinand fortelor armate*"(=personnel employed by the armed forces); "*categorii de forte*" (=branches); "*echipament / dotare – apreciere generala*" (=equipment/logistics – general characterization); "*viata in armata*" (= life in the military); "*relatii umane in cadrul mediului militar*" (=human relationships within the military environment); "*acronime /*

abrevieri folosite (desfasurati acronimarea)" (= acronyms/abbreviations in use – unfold the meaning); "expresii colocviale folosite in scopul *indulcirii* realitatilor negative" (= colloquialisms intentionally used to 'sweeten' negative realities). Each of the above mentioned topics were further detailed into more precise component parts (i.e. "personnel" consisted of civilians, military instructors, senior ranks, junior ranks, officers, non-commissioned officers/ warrant officers, human typologies, presence of women in the military (both military and civilian women). As far as language of the questionnaire is concerned, it was Romanian, considering that answers were supposed to indicate whether culture affects language. Out of 112 questionnaires, only 54 were completed thoroughly. The remaining 58 respondents invoked lack of any knowledge about slang terms or euphemisms with regard to specific topics/sub-topics. The category that generated the most euphemisms and slangy terms was "equipment/logistics – general characterization". Should we judge based on specialized theories, we may deduce that economic (and political) drawbacks weight quite heavily on professional accomplishment of young cadets. Personal weapons plus the necessary ammunition include (or lack!) name references: "*Natasha*" for the former Soviet originating AK-47 but also in response to the idea that a man in the military marries his weapon , while rounds of ammunition are referred to as '*drops*'. When reference goes to AK-47's performance, the weapons turns into the "*bitch*", probably in association with the noise it produce, its ugly appearance but bitter '*bite*' (= deadly effect). The fact that almost all of the respondents indicated this referential names for the weapon makes us believe that either second –year- cadets 'borrowed' the terms from senior officers and senior students or they all discovered the similarities and then shared them. Anyway, it is certain that these derogatory names were coined in the military community and not outside it. In turn, all surrounding realities pertaining to logistics underwent criticism. Pilots complained of *ZMT* (= "zbori mai tarziu" : *fly later on*) even

though their '*air-taxies*' were often nicknamed "*flying coffins*", "*flying jars*", missile guys mock at "*the fat lady*" (100mm caliber canon), electronic warfare cadets deal with "*crackers*' (jamming systems). As for place where instruction, military or academic, takes place a range of acronyms were provided. So, the Air force Academy was given the nickname of Academy of Harry Potter, due to sound resemblance between "*Henri*" and *Harry*, but also a parody of flight activities (on sticks and brooms, and not aboard planes), the boot camp is the very "*green hell*" (combination between the physical place where instruction takes place and the hardships of camp activities. Personal uniforms, believed to depersonalize people, were judged through each individual's perceptions related to them. For 24 of the cadets, uniforms were a manner to conceal the natural behavior of military students, a sort of '*bluefication*' or '*kaki- zation*' of young spirits (uniformization). When it comes to the mess hall and dining conditions, plus/ minus the quality of food delivered, almost all respondent mentioned some funny, ironic, yet suggestive references to food: '*sponge*' (=thickened with flour omelet); '*camp-boot sole*" (thick and usually medium cooked beef), "*festive beans*" (another type, though the same dish of beans).

A second positioned topic that supplied derogatory terms was that of human relationships within the military environment. Most of the acronyms cadets have invented or re-invented (see "PIFA(N)" (Romanian "prostia infinita a fortelor armate" = *the infinit supidity of the armed forces);* in the past, the term used to denominate newly recruits (probably an association of "pufan"=fluffy, and its transformation into 'pifan'). SGS, literally meaning "student /sergeant on guard" (Romanian: student/sergent gradat de serviciu) changed meaning into "slave on guard". Metonymy has again been used as a stylistic device for replacing a person by a concept, usually a pejorative one. Thus, the most severe and disrespectful officers and non-commissioned officers risk to give their names to a mockery category. Surprisingly enough very few mentioning of denatured

relationships male – female military personnel were indicated, but the terms did not carry sexual, vulgar connotation, but rather indignation for women's being treated in a 'softer manner'. The very analysis of all items resulting from the questionnaire administration could constitute the basis for future papers. For the time being, what has been mentioned so far offers a clear picture of the Saussurean dichotomous pair langue-parole and its relationship with the cultural background.

5. CONCLUSION

As far as the speedy evolution of slang and euphemisms is concerned, it is noticeable that their massive spread is possible due to a lessening of culture and civilization, more specifically due to an existent, insidious and proud subculture within the multiple channels through which slang is transmitted. Slang users take pleasure in their speaking differently from their ancestors, since discontinuity and anti-tradition tend to replace the favorite concepts of long forgotten intellectuals. The reason generally lies in a lack of communication between social groups, the absence of any other alternatives or in the impossibility of holding a clear option.

On the other hand, as long as sociology does not offer clear explanations, it would be interesting to observe the slang-user: superficial, roughly educated, acculturated, gregarious, adhering to a different scale of values, occasionally displaying some rebellion against the 'wooden language', or hatred for not being able to detach from his own past. Thus, slang becomes a type of release from constraints, a new form of freedom, or even protest.

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