

## THE USE OF ENGLISH VS. AMERICAN MILITARY TERMS BETWEEN THE XVII<sup>th</sup> and XX<sup>th</sup> CENTURIES

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**Abstract:** *The present paper focuses on presenting some aspects related to the use of military terminology, both British and American, during the XVII<sup>th</sup> and XX<sup>th</sup> centuries. When it comes to British English we can highlight the richness in military terms, as connected to how people lived during ancient times. They were conquerors, involved in historical armed conflicts, where a certain of weaponry was needed. The XVII<sup>th</sup> century represents a landmark of English language evolution. It is the moment when the American language began to shape itself. As language is concerned, trade and colonization altered language during the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century, thus becoming a rather corrupted one. English language continued to change as the British Empire moved across the world - to the U.S.A., Australia, New Zealand, India, Asia and Africa. American language fully emerged with The Spanish-American War (1898) which lasted for only four months but considerably improved language in general, and slang in particular.*

**Keywords:** *military system, borrowings, slang, change of meaning.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The identification of military terminology development is a difficult process because language has a major role in influencing culture, culture, in its turn, shapes language and thus, language change is a permanent phenomenon throughout history. From this interconditioning, the impossibility to recover the whole results, taking into account two entire dynamic variables.

But, analyzing it in depth, we find, on the one hand, that language is the culture (at the dawn of culture and language, for a population living under war time, it is natural for military terminology to have fundamentally influenced the development of culture), on the other hand language is a form of culture expression, ensuring its transmission, flow, transfer of cultural signs and codes. This second self-referential dimension, or metacommunication, is somehow aware of what happens in the depths of language and culture. As Pyles and Algeo sustain, „change is a normal state of language. Every language is turning into

something different, and when we hear a new word or a new pronunciation or novel use of and old word, we may be catching the early stages of a change.

Change is natural because a language system is culturally transmitted” (1993:13). Thus, the above mentioned authors see language as „undergoing revision constantly; with language such revision is slower than with some other cultural activities”, such as fashion, entertainment, etc. The XVIII<sup>th</sup> century was important for the development of modern English: the ruling tradition of neo-classical attitudes and prescriptive grammar laid the foundations for linguistic correctness on various levels. The XIX<sup>th</sup> century has decided the victory of English as spoken language of the English people, although it was firstly accepted as the most valued language for “creative literature” (Millward, 1996: 15), as early as the end of the XIV<sup>th</sup> century. The Spanish-American War (1898) lasted for only four months but improved slang considerably. The period was linguistically fruitful as it was the first time that American

troops had a chance to absorb foreign languages. American language borrowed Spanish military terms like: *insurrecto*, *troche*, *junta*, *ladrone*, *lay fuga*, *machete*, *incomunicado*.

## 2. THE XVII<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

We have to bring to attention the moment of the emergence of so-called “Black America” in August 1619, when a Dutch warship sailed up the James River to the colony of Jamestown, Virginia, together with 20 black people on board that were taken from a Spanish ship captured in the Carribean. Even if the geographical beginning – when the discovery of America happened in 1492 (made possible by Cristopher Columbus), the first signs of migration towards the Americas were visible during the above mentioned century. The most important tribes were: the Pueblo, the Apache (that were mostly hunters), the Iraquois – warriors, the North Pacific Haida and the Midwest Winnebagoes. This migration process had 5 “frontier phases” as □tefan Avādaneī calls them, both temporal and geographical ones (1993:25-26), as follows:

1. the sidewater phase of settlement (up to 1700);
2. the setting of fertile river valleys (1700 – 1750);
3. the fertile lands of Kentucky and Tennessee opened to explorers (1750 – 1775);
4. the treaty of 1783 that set the western boundary of the US on the Mississippi;
5. the 1803 Louisiana Purchase.

But, the first regular U.S. fighting force, the Continental Army, was founded by the Continental Congress on 14<sup>th</sup> of June, 1775. Its purpose was to add to the local militias in the American Revolution. It was under the control of a five-member civilian board. In 1789 this Continental Army was dissolved and a small regular army was established. The army’s size increased only in times of crisis, expanded with conscription and decreased during peacetime. Anyway, citizen soldiers were serving in the militia on the American frontier, even before the Declaration of Independence was drafted, written and adopted in 1776. Being allies of the English, the early

Americans protected the towns and farms from Indian and French invaders and helped expand the frontiers of the future nation. The U.S. military started not only as a means to apply force but it was and still is a reflection of the morals and traditions of the American way of life. This early frontier soldiers created new units, such as the Rangers that were the forerunners of today’s special operating forces. They were an example of bravery and inventiveness that reflects the freedom-loving and independent spirit that is still a character of the American military today.

As the language is concerned, the first English colonists in America continued to speak as they had done in England. But, step by step, language changed on both sides of the Atlantic. On the American continent, these changes were mainly caused by the new conditions that the colonists faced with. Therefore, American language has much to owe to the mother tongue, i.e. English of those times. As Pyles and Algeo state, “However, the English spoken in America at present has retained a good many characteristics of earlier British English that do not survive in contemporary British English” (1993:213). They further on support the idea that “to consider American English as inferior to British English is to impugn earlier standard British English as well, for these was little difference at the same time of the Revolution. (...) supposed characteristics of American English are also to be found in pre-Revolutionary British English (...)” (1993:213). Thus, an example of how language was unconsciously conserved is the retention of the American term “gotten”, still used nowadays. But, obviously, American English has lost a certain number of language characteristics, but that are still preserved in British English. And to prove this, we may consider the following example: “waistcoat” denoting a garment that Americans usually call a “vest”, it is a word that in England usually means “undershirt”.

In case of American inhabitants, there was a great need to name the topographical features, of fauna and flora that were kind of new for the colonists. All these acquired names that belong nowadays to the basic American stock. More, the inhabitants of the

New World were not illiterate at all. They were considered to be ambitious, industrious members of upper-lower and lower-middle classes (clergymen, lawyers and even people belonging to aristocracy). Therefore, it is likely that some cultural nucleus was created by that time within the early American communities. Thus, even if American English is basically a continuation of the VII<sup>th</sup> century English – ancestor of present-day British, Pyles and Algeo consider that the differences between American English and the British one are not of great importance, even if they are many (1993:215). And to stick to this register, we have to mention Randolph Quirk's remark that completes the above mentioned idea. In a review of the time, he said: "The long and imposing lists of so-called distinctively British and American words and usages are 75 per cent misleading; it turns out either that both the words so neatly separated are used in one or the other country, or that both are found in both countries but are used in slightly different contexts or in different proportions." (1956:7)

The idea of the English Academy appeared at the end of the XVII<sup>th</sup> century: Samuel Johnson wrote (1755) – *A Dictionary of the English Language* (2 volumes, of great achievement due to the fixed spelling), Joseph Priestly (1761) – *The Rudiments of the English Grammar* (he focuses on the importance of usage), Robert Lowth (1762) – *Short Introduction to English Grammar*, G. Campbell (1776) – *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (aiming at ascertaining the language just like Dryden and Swift). Furthermore, we can speak of Modern English as emerging fully by the beginning of the **Georgian era** in 1714, although **English orthography** remained somewhat fluid until the publication of Johnson's dictionary.

**2.1. The American Revolution.** Between 1775–1783 **thirteen colonies** in **North America** joined together to break free from the **British Empire**, combining to become the **United States of America**. By 1774, each colony had established a **Provincial Congress**, or an equivalent governmental institution, to govern itself, but still within the empire. The British responded by sending combat troops to re-impose direct rule. Through the **Second**

**Continental Congress**, the Americans managed the armed conflict against the British known as the **American Revolutionary War** (also called *The American War of Independence*). It represented the beginning of the division of English into national dialects that developed more or less independently and that had come to have their own language standards.

From the American War of Independence (1775–1783) onwards, we can discuss of an infusion of American military terms. Most of them were slang expressions, born out of conflict, boredom, good humor or bad food soldiers were given during wars. The new military words were heard and used across the lines during the Civil War, in which enemies spoke the same language.

**2.2. The Civil War (1861–1865).** Due to this war, the increase in migration was also possible. Italians, Jews, Yugoslavians, Ukrainians, Russians, Czechs, Bulgarians, Slavs, Poles, Chinese, Greeks and Armenians populated the American lands. This war led to changes due to war needs and it also changed the way wars would be fought. The need for weapons and supplies influenced the improvement in industry and production methods required to maintain the war effort. It opened ways to the age of modern technology. Everything seemed to happen more quickly, people were able to move farther and faster, to produce products more rapidly and to communicate with the help of wires. Thus, battles were conducted easily, at a different level. Therefore, during the Civil War rifled cannon came into its own with a corresponding increase in range and accuracy. By the end of the U.S. Civil War the totally self-contained modern cartridge with powder and bullet in a single metal container made its appearance and, by the Franco-Prussian War of 1871, the breech-loading rifle had become a standard in Europe. Two decades later the clip and magazine-fed rifle revolutionized infantry tactics. It made possible the introduction of truly modern dispersed infantry tactics which further increased the ability of infantry to fire and manoeuvre. After the Civil War, the U.S. Army and the Marine Corps were downsized and used as garrison (i.e. barracks) troops.

Words from the Civil War include terms like *skeddaddlers* (the name of those who ran away from the war, synonym of *deserter*), *blizzard* (an intense volley of musket fire), *commish* (a commission of any sort), *doodle* (a Union soldier), etc. "The Civil War spawned a slang that was both identifiable and proliferating. It was also seen as a nuisance" (Dickinson, 2004:2). As stated in the article *A Word About Slang*, published in *The United States Service Magazine* "The existence of a slang element in the Army cannot, of course, be prevented. It came from home, where the fault lies" (R.W. McAlpine, 1865). A Civil War glossary emerged, with terms that existed before the war but that only became important during the war. It includes a basic American military slang with some influences from the frontier, rural America, British shipping and the ancient traditions of the sea.

### 3. THE XVIII<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

The XVIII<sup>th</sup> century established regularity in spelling and later in pronunciation, defined the standard lexis by excluding dialect, slang and fixed the rules for the languages of literature and good style, in a unique fusion of literary and linguistic judgments with developments in political and cultural history. England began the Industrial Revolution within the XVII<sup>th</sup> century. This had an effect on the development of the language as new words had to be invented or existing ones modified to cope with the rapid changes in technology. New technical words were added to the vocabulary. They were named after the inventor or given the name of their choice (*trains, engine, pulleys, combustion, electricity, telephone, telegraph, camera* etc).

The XVIII<sup>th</sup> century was marked by two important points to keep in mind when considering any type of public behaviour of English and English-American societies. First of all, they were stratified societies and the ways in which people interacted with one another reflected their relative social positions. By the late eighteenth century, therefore, many had acquired the rudiments of polite conversation.

English language continued to change as the British Empire moved across the world - to the U.S.A., Australia, New Zealand, India, Asia and Africa. People settled and lived in their conquered places and as settlers interacted with natives, new words were added to the English vocabulary. Thus, English acquired terms from colonies, like: *caribou, moccasin, skunk* (Native Americans), *chilli, chocolate, coyote, tomato* (of Spanish and Portuguese influence via Mexico), *barbecue, canoe, hurricane, potato, tobacco* (Cuba and West Indies), *bungalow, jungle* (India), *gorilla, voodoo, zebra* (Africa), *boomerang, kangaroo* (Australia). French has an important role in this respect, deforming the English language. Philosophy also, was concerned with linguistics matters, i.e. with the idea of modern grammar.

The XVIII<sup>th</sup> century abounds in military terms: *bastion, battalion, battery, bayonet, bomb, brigade, calibre, canister, cap, casemate* (a chamber built within the walls of a fort), *corporal, crossbelt* (belts organized to hang diagonally across the body), *epaulette, fascines* (bundles of tightly bound twigs and sticks hastily assembled and tied together), *frigate, grenade, grenadier, guards, hammer, lock, lunette, muzzle, rifle, royal, shrapnel* (often used erroneously to refer to fragments of any artillery shell), *troop, waistcoat*.

### 4. THE FIRST WORLD WAR

**Jingoism** (extreme patriotism, especially in the form of aggressive or warlike foreign policy) was not the only source of linguistic creativity in the period. American war slang fully emerged during the First World War. The circumstances of it were so horrific, so extraordinary, and involved so many people that a new language was almost essential.

Many words which emerged at the time have clear associations with the conflict, such as *camouflage, blimp, aerobatics, demob* and *shell shock*. Others have a more complex history, emerging from soldiers' slang (itself a product of the increased cosmopolitanism ushered in by the war). Therefore, Americans communicated mostly in slang, a vernacular language used by uneducated soldiers. Some

examples are: *dogtag* meaning military plates, *doughboy* bearing the meaning of American soldiers. They used a mixture of American, French and English equipment and were not allowed to fight independently. It is an informal term, usually used for members of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) during the First World War. But the term dates back to the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848, when some observers noticed that U.S. infantry forces were covered with chalky dust from marching through the dry terrain of Northern Mexico, thus giving the impression of unbaked dough. The term was not so much used during the World War II and it was soon replaced by the terms like: *G.I.*, *Troop* or *Dogface*. After the war it totally disappeared.

British soldiers adopted the language of their enemies just as keenly as they adapted that of their foreign allies, as is shown by the origins of the verb *strafe*. The German phrase *Gott strafe England* ('God punish England') was a common greeting in Germany from 1914 on – 'the recognised toast throughout Hunland', as one contemporary colourfully put it. Refusing to be daunted by the threat, the term was hijacked by British soldiers, who began to use 'strafe' as a comic word to refer to any harsh punishment or attack, whether targeting the enemy ('strafing the Fritzes') or doled out by the British *brass hats* (high-ranking officers).

In case of the Americans, during the First World War, xenophobic feelings bolstered by war-induced nationalism focused not just on learning English but also, driven by anti-German sentiment, on discarding allegiances other than to the United States. The term *kaput*, was used to mock the Germans. The American slang was very much tied to the British one as both armies fought together.

The American linguistic innovation was significant enough to have a major impact on how the British soldier spoke, but not enough to overwhelm it. There were linguistic changes in all domains, especially in aviation, where pilots of two English-speaking nations competed with each other in terms of producing the most colourful language to minimize risk and fear. Many war terms persisted until the World War II and beyond

that (like *doughboy*, meaning infantryman; the term was exclusively applied to the Infantry).

As for the British military terms are concerned, the war between 1914-1918 featured a great currency of words: some words which were either new or enjoyed great currency during the war become a part of the vocabulary of civilian life. Thus, *sector*: a distinct area or part. It was used in the sense of a specific portion of the fighting line; *barrage*: originally an artificial barrier like a dam in a river.; *artillery or machine-gun*: designated a protective screen of heavy artillery or machine-gun fire; *dud*: a general word for any count file thing; *shell*: was specifically applied to a shell that did not explode; *ace*: acquired the meaning of a crack airman and **hand grenade** was the hand grenade that we encounter back into 1661, but that acquired new currency during the war.

Many British military terms and even slang had their origin in India and spread from there throughout the Empire. Here are some Indian/Hindu words used by British Forces: *Badmash* =rascal/scoundrel; *Basha*=native house, hut; *Bibi*, *Bint*=Girl; *Bundook*=rifle; *Chabeli*=sweetheart; *Charpoy*=bed; *Chota Wallah* = little fellow; *Cutch* = inferior; *Havildar* =Sgt.; *Jawan*=soldier; *Jildi*=quickly; *allum*=understand; *Pialla*=Mug; *Ram Ram*=hello; *Shabash*=bravo; *Tik Hai*=all right.

## 5. THE SECOND WORLD WAR

World War II is the period when military terms develop due to modern technology, where rocket technology appears. The war led to voluntary cooperation of distinct nations, with allies like Italy and Japan that had their contribution not only to the modern warfare but also to changes in language, thus, in military terminology, especially in the air force. Allied forces had to fight and cooperate, thing not easy to be accomplished from language point of view.

Differences in language were obvious and a certain need of a standardized corpus emerged out of it. Americans and British had their own ego when it came to language; military terms were added from both sides during the war. Language standardization

appeared as a natural phenomenon, as allied troops had to have common training, each and every force category had to be trained according to its specific mission.

This period is one of memorable linguistic experimentation an innovation in terms of slang. Furthermore, "World War II may be remembered for a number of reasons, and probably the least of these is that it provided a king-size fund of new slang for the diversion of lexicographers" (Lighter, *apud* Dickinson, 2004:114). World War II represents the starting point of the introduction of acronyms and initials into language, especially into the American one. Although some traditionalists consider that these terms do not belong to slang, the war was full of them e.g. *G.I.* (government issue, later on synonym with *army*), *WAC* (Women's Army Corps), *A.A. fire* (antiaircraft; one of the war's most persistent initials), etc., due to the fighting men that were markers on these type of slag military terminology. Thus, they adopted the technique of similitude, used hidden similarities, abbreviations, compositions of words and word formations being more freely used. It was also a period when the American vocabulary was enriched with verbs and phrasal verbs. It should not omit one very important aspect, namely, that most of American soldiers came from different social categories, each and every person bringing his own distinct language that belonged to his native place.

World War I and World War II brought together people from different parts of the world. The period was followed by a great social mobility that substantially contributed to the decrease in differences between social accents, especially in the U.K.

## 6. OTHER CONFLICTS

**The Korean conflict** was a really bloody conflict, with slang words that were mainly used during the World War II. This happened because most of the American soldiers fought during the latter one. Nevertheless, new terms emerged, too, due to the new technology (it was the first time when jet fighters and helicopters were used) together with the

Korean culture. Americans and South Koreans fought together, usually in the same unit, being called KATUSA (Korean Augmentation to the U.S. Army). Thus, linguistic differences were once again obvious as plenty of nations participated in the U.N. forces. The official military language tended to include more initials and acronyms. By the 1952, we can notice terms like: MASH (mobile army surgical hospital), MORCs (Medical Officer Reserve Corps) and DORCs (Dental Officer Reserve Corps). Stiff-sounding prefixes and suffixes were also present: *detrain*, *detruck* that evolved into *detraining point* or *detrucking point*. Articles of the time noticed that the American vocabulary closely resembled plain English.

**The War in Vietnam** soldiers used terms that were utilized in previous wars. But, this conflict also produced its own vocabulary, based on a rough and direct jungle warfare terms. As the Americans were defeated, the terms are full of frustrations and cynicism.

**The Gulf War** produced new official jargon that seemed to be more vivid than ever. Thus, "hard" and "soft" targets became: *degraded*, *neutralized*, *suppressed*, *eliminated*, *cleansed*, *impacted*, *taken out*, etc.

**The Cold War** language was shaped by the huge military buildup and by the nuclear threat. Acronyms, code words, jargon and slang formed the military language spoken during this war.

Even the term Cold War was created in 1946 by Herbert Bayard Swope. He mentioned it to Bernard M. Baruch who used it in 1947 and made it known in 1948, during a statement to the Senate War Investigating Committee. It represented the state of international tension where all necessary measures were employed to achieve national objectives.

On the other side, British soldiers' slang was also very colorful, many words being derived from Hindu Indian and other African dialects, or dating back to the Boer Wars, fought during 1880-1881 and 1899-1902 by the British Empire against the two independent Boer republics, the Oranje Vrijstaat (Orange Free State) and the Republiek van Transvaal (Transvaal Republic). They are called "the

South African War" as the population of South Africa was also involved in the conflicts.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The identification of military terminology development is a difficult process because language has a major role in influencing culture, culture, in its turn, shapes language and thus, language change is a permanent phenomenon throughout history. From this interconditioning, the impossibility to recover the whole results, taking into account two entire dynamic variables. But, analyzing it in depth, we find, on the one hand, that language is the culture (at the dawn of culture and language, for a population living under war time, it is natural for military terminology to have fundamentally influenced the development of culture), on the other hand language is a form of culture expression, ensuring its transmission, flow, transfer of cultural signs and codes. This second self-referential dimension, or metacommunication, is somehow aware of what happens in the depths of language and culture. As Pyles and Algeo sustain, „change is a normal state of language.

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Colonialism is an important factor that helped the English language spread widely. English established itself on many parts of the globe, from Australia, Southeast Asia, Hong Kong, India, and Africa to North America. The British government established schools in these countries, which helped the language to expand. The governments of former British colonies later adopted English as their national language. This phenomenon finally led to more varieties of English all over the world. In England, the so-called Standard English or

'national language' is used mostly in formal contexts. If one were to ask whether English today can still be considered a national language, the answer is yes and no. It can still be considered a 'national language' by the British since many Britons still speak that language and the British government still recognizes it as its national language. But for the rest of the world, it can no longer be considered a national language. Many people adopted English as their mother tongue or second language. English has become an international language or a *lingua franca* for many people worldwide. It is now a national language not only of England but of countries like Singapore, India and so on.

When we speak about modern warfare, military terminology is expanding rapidly, due to recent developments in all fields, especially in technology. Thus, we can notice that modern technology lead to language development, especially in the Airforce, as new types of combat aircrafts and rockets have been designed and put into practice. In this respect, specialized training of military pilots is involved in this particular area of interest, no matter the country they come from. This teaching of specialized terms should be standardized and done quickly in order to avoid fatal disasters like plane crashes due to certain temrs misunderstandings.

American language holds supremacy in the military field, being the language of military treaties, of general orders and of regulations. The U.S Army took part in all major conflicts starting with the Revolution and continuing with the War of 1812, The Mexican War, the Civil War, the Indian Wars, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, the war in Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf Wars and the Iraq War.

Warfare and the military have greatly impacted the English language throughout centuries. Furthermore, the military language and terminology are very productive as it's a language built during crisis situations, each and every crisis creating in turns a certain proper vocabulary and terminology. Many British military terms were born during the World War I and II, par of them being lost with the age of modern mechanized warfare.

The Pidgin English spoken in the north-west Territory of New Guinea contributed substantially to the British terminology.

All members of the Commonwealth contributed to the military vocabulary, together with the Australians that supplied some humorous terms and phrases.

An official standardized terminology does not completely fulfill the needs of the fighting soldiers. Military slang is as old as the warfare and it covers all aspects of soldiers' lives. They are the ones who shaped language in times of war, with nicknames, acronyms, abbreviations, etc.

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