

War Terminology and its Psychological Impact

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Abstract: There is a rich terminology related to war, including the field of ammunition, battle strategies or communicative approaches. Visuals play a decisive role as they convey a greater persuasive force than the words frequently used in various communication channels. Words transcend linguistic boundaries and the clear or subliminal messages conveyed by the oral or written texts inevitably influence the ordinary reader who otherwise does not have a rich culture of the way a war is waged. The present work aims to highlight the semantic richness of war terminology and its psychological load. The study includes a series of eloquent examples from the online press, based on a rigorous selection of publications.

Keywords: war; visuals; psychological load; communication; terminology

1. Introduction

The escalation of the conflict in Ukraine is not only related to the military forces of the states involved, but also to the development of specialized terminology. Advanced technology, information flow, propaganda, disinformation, fake news have all contributed to creating a favorable framework for linguistic analysis of war-related terms hitherto unknown to the ordinary reader. The communicative register has been imbued with a rich terminology in terms of the ammunition regime, lexical nuances and connotative meanings whose main role is to create a significant psychological impact both on the direct witnesses to the events and the recipients of information provided by the media. Words transcend linguistic boundaries and the clear or subliminal messages conveyed by the oral or written texts inevitably influence the ordinary reader who may not have a rich culture of the way a war is waged.

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2. Communication and the power of words

There is a dynamics of communication to the public which takes place on various levels. On the one hand, there is physical communication from the place where the hostilities take place, informational communication through which the whole news flow is subjected to significant linguistic analyses both by experts in the military field and the ordinary public whose subjective or objective interpretations are included in the general picture of the war. On the other hand, the most important and impactful level is the psychological or cognitive field in which individuals have their own perception on events.

Sometimes words or the messages they convey are not transmitted accurately creating communication ambiguities among readers. Therefore, credibility of sources and media channels have a decisive role in creating the most realistic framework.

Based on cultural beliefs, geographical areas or group interests' goals, communication is rendered differently, concepts are shaped and words translated depending on the culture we belong to. Even the psychological load is perceived separately depending on these factors. What can be more impactful in the Asian culture may not have the same echo in Western civilization. Such concepts as *freedom, democracy, military conflict, Nazism, Communism* etc. are understood from different perspectives depending on each cultural area, historical background or social impact.

For example, the word *Nazism* can only be related to the ideology and practices associated with Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party in Nazi Germany. The frequently used term of *denazification* in the actual conflict is quite bizarre, in so far as it refers to the process undergone in Germany after the Second World War. In reality, this misused term can be considered a powerful tool of propaganda totally disconnected from the history of the Nazi regime and out of context.

(1) *But Putin-style "denazification" rhetoric cannot be written off as the ravings of a mad emperor.*

<https://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/denazification-putin-style>

(2) *He said the goal was demilitarisation and "denazification" of Ukraine.*

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60503037>

Cultural understanding and language expertise are key elements to creating efficient communication. Clear and consistent messages are closely related to shaping opinions and delivering the best messages towards the targeted audience.

Given the highly technological era and the speed of spreading information, there is no rigorous control regarding the quality of the news disseminated in the virtual space. Lack of information accuracy, lexical and semantic inconsistencies, poor translation or word misinterpretation may cause disharmony of communication. The huge amount of news transmitted in mass media is impossible to supervise or adjust in compliance with certain deontological or linguistic norms. The cascade of news is no longer subject to any rules; on the contrary the main purpose is communicative chaos,

propaganda, disinformation or superficial analysis. The more concrete and focused on its semantic content communication becomes the more the right framework for understanding and deepening the information is created.

The readily used technology of the 21st century has created the suitable framework for individuals to get engaged in the public information domain. The content propagation is much facilitated by all mass media channels. Propaganda, for example, has also become a powerful and dangerous form of communication through which the public is persuaded to adopt a less objective perspective on facts. Its emphasis is mainly on an emotional rather than a rational response of the information presented.

As Merlin, 2013, Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015 described it *Propaganda is the use of persuasive information to manipulate a target audience into a behaviour desired by the propagandist*. On the other hand, propaganda was perceived as "a threat to liberal democracies"(Ross, 2002, p. 17). The large audience is no longer an isolated receiver of the intended message, but highly engaged with it. People are propaganda consumers in the most active way and their strong engagement triggers increase of responsiveness, expansion of content or exacerbation of judgments.

The massive flow of messages makes it impossible to differentiate between authenticity and falsehood of information. However, serious filtering of the news as well as the development of analytical and critical thinking based on language and communication can be useful tools to handle propaganda, misinformation or fake news. Considering the sources, reading beyond headlines, researching the site and the author or checking biases are among the efficient strategies to fight such phenomena.

3. Cultivation of fear

In its general meaning, *fear* is the feeling you get when you are worried that something bad is going to happen (Idoceanline.com). Fear has become iconic for any social crisis a society is going through. The vocabulary of fear is diverse and comprises different forms of intensity: anxiety, anguish, phobia, fright etc. The list of fears we experience is infinite: fear of natural disasters, poverty, isolation, disease, death etc. There are justified or imaginary, individual or collective fears which dominate all the cultural spaces. Whether we become aware of fear or not, the way we manage it differs substantially depending on our culture, education or environment. War, nuclear or destruction fear is topical and creates a spiraling cycle of distrust among those facing the military conflict. Irrespective of its intensity, fear has destructive consequences on the human mind.

As interpreted and underlined in mass media, fear is no longer a direct menace or demonstration of power but a powerful tool in the way of misleading the ordinary reader. Fear creates new connections and transforms existing meanings (Lotman M., 2009:1219). Fear may lead to ambiguity of language through overuse of repetition, misleading information or confusing theories.

The war related fear is highlighted either in a more concrete way through a wide array of vivid images or abstractly through a series of subliminal messages

spread by all communication channels. The concealment of various sources causing fear is related to a strategic communication. Every discourse is intentionally imbued with fear so that the public should be confused and distracted from the core issues in the unfolding military conflict.

The abundance of separate pieces of information, distorted truth or highly technical language, all have the role to amplify feelings of doubt or inability to grasp the information transmitted.

Fear may collocate with verbs or adjectives as in the following examples:

(3) *'I felt paralysed by fear': woman describes escape from Ukraine.*

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/18/i-felt-paralysed-by-fear-mother-describes-escape-from-russia-invasion-ukraine>

(4) *Red lights and painted arrows fuel fear of Russian agents.*

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60879945>

(5) *Putin's story shows his great fear.*

<https://www.ukrweekly.com/uwwp/putins-story-shows-his-great-fear/>

Most frequently, the adjectives preceding the noun *fear* (constant/ deep/ growing fear) have the role to amplify the gravity of a situation. This is related to our biological bias to respond to even-low probability threats very seriously.

(6) *Those who grew up during the Cold War found it hard to escape the relatively constant fear of a nuclear catastrophe.*

<https://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/29/health/nuclear-disaster-fearscoping/index.html>

Fear of a nuclear war is the most prevailing feelings because it triggers the most intense inner anxiety and is experienced collectively. Any partially destructive effect of a weapon is impactful, but the nuclear weapon is what raises the maximum tension dominating the whole world. As a matter of fact, a nuclear attack impedes a human basic instinct to survive. Its unpredictable nature, the impossibility of prevention and all the psychological effects deriving from a nuclear strike may all contribute to mass destabilisation and dehumanisation. In his remarkable speech in Strasbourg (1979), Earl Mountbatten emphasized the illusion of nuclear war "...I say in all sincerity that the nuclear arms race has no military purpose. Wars cannot be fought with nuclear weapons. Their existence only adds to our perils because of the illusions which they have generated."

4. The impact of visuals in rendering war reality

People's behavior has always been visually-oriented. We perceive and understand the world around us by using our senses. Visuals stand for an efficient means of communication and throughout history cultures were mostly discovered visually rather than cognitively. We reproduce, share and interpret information through visuals because our main tendency is to decipher reality based on what we see or experience.

Today we are provided with a wide range of visual materials including videos, posters, flashcards, computer programs etc. Technology has contributed substantially to improving images and symbols in order to create the most accurate picture of our immediate reality.

War reality seems to be better described through images rather than words. Visual communication exploits any factor that influences the individual's emotions, affections, perception, reasoning etc. The comparison between the force of the word and visuals suggests that the message transmitted by the image requires less effort than the perception of a linguistic message.

Speaking of the written word and the image, D. Victoroff emphasized the idea that "the text delivers the message in stages, while the image communicates it instantly" (D. Victoroff, *Psychologie de la publicité*, p. 144, P.U.F, Paris, 1970). Apart from its instantaneity, the image has a more suggestive force because it displays a wide range of emotions. Images do not only inform us about the military events but they also help us to shape our understanding of human suffering. The realistic representation of war through images rendering blood, blazing cities, mass graves, wounded and dead inside the bunkers, crying children or helpless elderly is no longer interpreted in terms of propaganda but as reliable information and a vivid scenery of what people live and witness.

The concept of *visual literacy* as a form of communication was developed by Debes in 1968. In its basic form it refers to our ability to read, write and create visual images. Although its initial purpose was related to the art field, recently it has extended its use to semiotics, psychology, linguistics or cultural studies. Interpretation of images in war can be purely subjective and the meaning we attribute to various signs depends on our level of knowledge and ingenuity to decipher all the relevant aspects. As Alex Potts stated "images and objects are not only mediated by conventions, but meaning is largely activated by cultural conventions." (Potts A., p. 20)

Even if most of the war visuals may be highly correlated to what is happening in the battlefield, technology and its power to manipulate images has given rise to serious debate about the content transmitted through all communication channels. Taking pictures from video games or displaying images incompatible with the war context or the natural climate highlight an uncontrollable virtual framework and unprofessional journalism.

Irrespective of their purpose, images transmit messages faster, trigger emotions and enhance comprehension. The dimension we give to each visual is tightly correlated to our power of understanding and our ability to decode each message included. Objectivity and balance, reliance on official sources and access to theatres of action should become key elements in depicting war scenes. Any deviation or unjustifiable exaggeration of war actions may result in error, confusion and emotional escalation.

5. War-related terminology and its psychological impact

The rise of the conflict in Ukraine is not only related to the military forces of the states involved but also to the evolution of some specialized terminology whose main role is to explain the complexity of the weapons used, the advanced technology as well as the psychological impact of the war-related terms.

The prevailing sources of information abound in words strictly related to war, psychological terms, economic or legal terms in order to better highlight the magnitude of the events. The striking force of psychological words, for example, has a major role because they bring into play unique mental mechanisms or behaviour processes which must be dealt with carefully in order to understand their importance especially in case of military conflict.

Working both in a direct or figurative meaning, military vocabulary becomes a powerful weapon having an emotional potential on the addressee. Most of the newspaper headlines have become the *quintessence* of the content and their manipulative force is effective and impactful. The printed press is no longer interested in detailed technical depiction of events as long as the title itself contains the key elements that influence the reader. One of the most frequently used terms in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is *denazification* or its equivalent verb *denazify*.

(7)When Vladimir Putin announced Russia's invasion of Ukraine at dawn on Thursday, he justified the "special military operation" as having the goal to "denazify" Ukraine.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/25/vladimir-putin-ukraine-attack-antisemitism-denazify>

(8)Ukraine's Nazi problem is real, even if Putin's denazification claim isn't.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/ukraine-has-nazi-problem-vladimir-putin-s-denazification-claim-war-ncna1290946>

The attempt to justify an unjustifiable war in Ukraine and to twist historic events has turned the Russian leader's scenario into a grotesque fantasy little or not at all related to the process undergone in Germany after the Second World War. The creation of a false equivalence between modern Ukraine and Nazi Germany can only be considered a pretext and an instrument to divide democracies. Putin's misuse of denazification is part of an intentional and strategic language and involves various attempts to misinterpret and distort the Nazi past. However, the highly repetitive use of the term which was once abhorrent in history has now become meaningless. It is only a powerful tool of propaganda completely disconnected from its original historical context and meaning. Other frequently used terms include war weapons. The leaders' discourse brings to the fore the importance and complexity of the weapons used in war. *Rocket artillery, ballistic missiles, cluster munitions, drones, thermo baric weapons,*

chemical, biological or nuclear weapons are just a few of the threats towards target areas.

(9) *The United Kingdom has accused Russia of deploying thermobaric weapons systems in Ukraine, raising fears there could be an escalation of the damage being done as Moscow intensifies its assault on major cities a week after invading its neighbor.*

<https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-using-thermobaricweapons/31734007.html>

(10) *American intelligence officials have discovered that the barrage of ballistic missiles Russia has fired into Ukraine contain a surprise: decoys that trick air-defense radars and fool heat-seeking missiles.*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/14/us/russia-ukraine-weapons-decoy.html>

In addition to their practical use, weapons arouse strong feelings which are often associated with widespread destructive effects. Gun ownership causes fear, anxiety and a high risk of life loss. From a cultural standpoint, weapons are deeply rooted into various social practices and bear a specific symbolism. From their main role of life conservation and moral values like fairness on the battlefield, weapons have extended their use and now carry different other connotations.

In contemporary contexts, weapons are more related to increased level of crime, distress, fear and extreme danger of mass destruction. Fear of gun possession is fully justified even if the contemporary society is more focused on *weapons* as communication tools with a manipulative role on the public.

The real dimension of the armed conflict in Ukraine is also illustrated by the use of a large number of psychological terms with strong connotative nuances and communicative valences. Mass media content abounds in qualifying adjectives, nouns, verbs and adverbs of degree whose main role is to render the objective reality of the military conflict. The military operation is described as *invasion, harsh reality, hell on earth, murderous, barbaric effort, genocide, toxic, heinous, demonizing* etc. War is *waged, pulverizes the Russian economy, rages, war crimes proliferate, the Russian economy is shrinking* etc.

(11) *But we can't push aside that we are witnessing a barbaric effort to redraw borders by brutal force and erase national identity and self-determination with no room for compromise.*

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/03/07/ukrainian-foreign-minister-theres-more-world-can-be-doing-help-us-fight-russia/>

(12) *"It smells of genocide" Putin said in 2015, remarking on the unresolved conflict in the east.*

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/13/is-there-any-justification-for-putins-war>

(13) *Toxic Putin is going for bust. The west must stop him before this contagion spreads.*

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/13/toxic-putin-is-going-for-bust-the-west-must-stop-him-before-this-contagion-spreads>

(14) Ukraine's leaders will not agree...and heinous war crimes proliferate and why should they?

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/13/toxic-putin-is-going-for-bust-the-west-must-stop-him-before-this-contagion-spreads>

(15) Turkey steps up Black Sea naval activity as war rages in Ukraine.

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/turkey-steps-black-sea-naval-activity-war-rages-ukraine>

There is great emphasis on psychologically laden words which convey significant messages about the scope of the military operations. Human behavior and perception change substantially in times of war in comparison with peacetime. Reality is seen either in opposite terms of good-bad, satisfactory-unsatisfactory or it encompasses shades of grey. There is an individual interpretation of events based on personal knowledge, depth in understanding the phenomena or our capacity to differentiate between realistic or fantasy reasons.

Regardless of the underlying causes of an armed conflict, human perception is subjective and biased and the emphasis is on the outcomes and the actors' personal experiences.

6. Conclusions

Any military conflict will always be steeped in the collective memory of humankind whose main resources to respond to it differ from one culture to another. In its essence war does not bring anything good, except for sorrow, casualties, trauma and mental exhaustion. Beyond weapons, there is a rich propaganda which influences the general public, a wide range of specialized terms, dynamic communication and a variety of visuals.

All these elements contribute to configuring war setting and developing a deeper understanding of reality. The psychological impact of the terms used in mass media is tightly related to the natural course of events. Diversity of language and the richness of connotations make the ordinary reader more receptive to change and provide them with a remarkable capacity of adaptation to unforeseen life contexts.

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