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Military Linguistics: Russian in the Red/Soviet Army¹

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The development of military linguistics, a field similar to military anthropology or military history, would benefit the disciplines of linguistics and strategic studies. For linguists interested in society, the military offers another cultural group with which to contrast civilian society and a format for examining how institutions shape communication. Linguistic studies can aid strategic studies by explaining how discourse reinforces military culture and hierarchy, as well as the interaction between military and civilian society.

Since language reflects the society which produces it, linguistics can be used to better understand culture. If militaries are seen as their own cultures, then, predictably,

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the resulting discourse will have distinct traits. These linguistic and cultural distinctions are likely a reaction to the extreme conditions faced in combat. Despite the fact that non-linguists might readily accept that military discourse differs from its civilian counterpart,² comprehensive linguistic studies of the nature of military discourse are rarely conducted. Indeed, military linguistics is neglected as an academic field. On the internet, the most frequent uses of 'military linguistics' involve finding translators or helping officers acquire a second language. Linguists outside of the armed forces studying the military tend to focus on the political aspect of language. For example, Montgomery argues that the lexicon of modern warfare is designed to "be obscurantist and euphemistic, creating an illusory sense of precision."³ Whether teaching language skills or examining the framing of military lexicon, neither approach explains to what extent and why communication in the military is distinct from civilian discourse.

Twentieth-century Russian in the Red Army or Soviet Army, as it was known after the Great Patriotic War, is a good case study for both institutional and linguistic reasons. The Red Army's dual command structure during the Civil War (1917-1921) and the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), in which "commanding officers of regiments and higher had to submit their orders for ratification [to] the commissar or appropriate military soviet in order to make them official," added politics to the military hierarchy.⁴ While Reese maintains "the issue of dual command . . . seems to have had little impact at the front," Glantz and House argue that "the overall performance of the Red Army hierarchy was so poor that it contributed to the confusion caused by the surprise attack" in June 1941.⁵ Likewise, ethnicity became an increasingly important subject in the Soviet Army after the 1960s, influencing both military and civilian society. These political, ethnic and social situations are important when examining the role discourse plays in the army and the influence of the army on civilian literacy and communication. Additionally, selecting Russian is linguistically advantageous. Since language is

² One example from popular culture is the use of a Navy dialogue consultant in the production of *Top Gun*.

³ Martin Montgomery, *An Introduction to Language and Society*, 3rd ed. (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 257.

⁴ Roger R. Reese, *Red commanders: a social history of the Soviet Army officer corps, 1918–1991* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas, 2005), pp. 67-68, 159-160.

⁵ Roger R. Reese, *The Soviet military experience: a history of the Soviet Army, 1917–1991* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 126; David W. Glantz and Jonathan House, *When Titans clashed: How the Red Army stopped Hitler* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995), p. 64.

idiosyncratic, it can be difficult to make broad conclusions. Fortunately, a standardized form of Russian, known as Contemporary Standard Russian, has become the preferred speech and writing of the well-educated, and is the codified form broadly taught as a second language.⁶ By comparing discourse from the Red Army and Soviet Army with Contemporary Standard Russian, one can begin to examine how the institution shapes discourse.

The most important and difficult task in studying communication is finding authentic examples of discourse. Since civilian access to army discourse is restricted, this study is constrained by the availability of data. Four studies of Russian in the army examined different aspects of discourse including literacy during the Civil War, the vocabulary used in war documents, military jargon in the late Soviet period and profanity.⁷ Films and novels can be used to augment these studies and provide a more complete representation of discourse in the Red Army and Soviet Army. The drawback of using film and literary sources made for civilian consumption is they must present military language in such a way that civilians can understand it and, thus, it may not be a true rendition of the language. For example, the Great Patriotic War film . . . *A Zori Zdes' Tikhie* (And the Dawns Are Quiet Here) was “an accomplished piece of popular filmmaking” and the Afghanistan film *9 Rota* (The 9th Company) was a blockbuster, recouping its costs in a week.⁸ Similarly, Viktor Nekrasov’s novel *V okopakh Stalingrada* (*In the trenches of Stalingrad*, translated as *Front-line Stalingrad*) has become part of the

⁶ Bernard Comrie, Gerald Stone, and Maria Polinsky, *The Russian language in the twentieth century* (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 3-6.

⁷ I.N. Shpil'reyn, D.I. Reytynbarg, and G.O. Netskiy, *Yazyk Krasnoarmeytsa: Opyt issledovaniya slovarya krasnoarmeytsa Moskovckogo garnizona* (The language of the Red Army soldier: an experiment in the study of the vocabulary of the Red Army soldier of the Moscow garrison), (Moscow-Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoye Izdatel'stvo, 1928); A.N. Kolgushkin, *Lingvistika v voyennom dele* (*Linguistics in military science*) (Moscow: Voennoye Izdatel'stvo Minoborony SSSR, 1970); Pëtr Likholtov, “Sovremenny russkiy voyenny zhargon v real'nom obshcheniy, khudozhestvennoy literature i pubitsistike: Sistemno-yazykovoy, sotsiolingvisticheskiy i funktsional'no-stilisticheskiy aspekty (Modern Russian military jargon in real conversation, literature and mass media: language system, sociolinguistic, functional and stylistic aspects)” (PhD diss., University of Jyväskylä, 1998); Vadim Mikhailin, “Russian Army *Mat* as a Code System Controlling Behaviour in the Russian army” *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, no. 1 (2004): <http://www.pipss.org/index93.html>.

⁸ . . . *A Zori Zdes' Tikhie* (And the Dawns Are Quiet Here), directed by Stanislav Rostotskiy, Kinostudiya imeni Gor'kogo, 1972, DVD; *9 Rota* (The 9th Company), directed by Fedor Bondarchuk, Art Pictures Studio, 2005, DVD; Denise J. Youngblood, *Russian War Films: On the Cinema Front, 1914-2005* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2007), pp. 165-166, 207-208.

memory of the Great Patriotic War.⁹ Unlike the films, which were produced after the conflicts had ended, Nekrasov wrote it during the war and it might be a more accurate representation of a Soviet soldier's experience in the trenches of Stalingrad. However as an officially accepted work, for which Nekrasov received the *Stalin Prize* in 1947, it likely gives a filtered perspective of language in the Battle of Stalingrad. Therefore, this study is restricted by available linguistic research and the reliability of films and novels as sources of authentic army discourse.

This article attempts to apply linguistic theory and methods to demonstrate the potential for military linguistics. The first two sections take a relatively technical approach to evaluate the lexical, syntactic and phonological nature of communication in the army and then categorize discourse as a language variety. These sections are designed to determine the extent to which army discourse is distinct from civilian discourse and, as a result, evaluate how separate military culture is from civilian society. The next two sections discuss why the army has developed distinct discourse and how discourse reinforces army hierarchy and social structure. An additional section examines the way in which the Red Army and Soviet Army shaped civilian literacy, fluency and discourse. The final section suggests the development of military linguistics as an area of study and future research.

The Nature of Discourse in the Army

The most commonly studied aspect of Russian army communication is its lexicon. The vocabulary is sufficiently distinct from standard civilian Russian that both English and Soviet publishers produced Russian-English military dictionaries.¹⁰ Additionally, there are two other unique aspects to the lexicon which are not included in standard dictionaries: slang and *mat*. According to Likholtov, the lexicon of Russian Border Guards' slang is "outside the range of the norms of literary language."¹¹ Likewise the

⁹ Viktor Nekrasov, *V okopakh Stalingrada* (In the trenches of Stalingrad) (Saint Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Azbuka-Klassika, 2005); Viktor Nekrasov, *Front-line Stalingrad*, trans. David Floyd (London: Harvard Press, 1962).

¹⁰ Elizabeth Hill, ed., *Russian-English, English-Russian Military Dictionary* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1983); G.A. Sudzilovskiy, ed., *Anglo-russkiy voyennyi slovar'* (English-Russian military dictionary), 2nd ed. (Moscow: Voennoye izdatel'stvo, 1968).

¹¹ Likholtov, "Russkiy voyennyi zhargon," p. 190.

army also has its own system of obscenities, “army *mat*,” which Mikhailin describes as being “different from the same patterns in the everyday speech practices of the majority of . . . modern Russian-speak[ers].”¹² The social function of slang and *mat* will be discussed later but it is worth noting that slang and army-specific profanity, in addition to ‘institutional’ lexicon, make army communication distinct.

The ‘institutional’ or ‘professional’ lexicon is small and specialized. During the Russian Civil War, Shpil’reyn, Reytnybnarg and Netskiy examined the effectiveness of Red Army literacy programs.¹³ They discovered that soldiers finishing their service in 1924 had a vocabulary of 2,954 words and the vocabulary of those entering the army in 1924 and 1925 ranged between 3,576 and 4,693 words. Similarly, the political guides, *politruki*, who taught these soldiers, had a slightly larger vocabulary ranging from 3,048 to 5,512 words.¹⁴ By the 1960s, Kolgushkin conducted statistical analysis on military texts to study tokens, “the total number of words in a text,” and types, or the number of unique words which “occur repeatedly.”¹⁵ He found that battle documents displayed a large amount of lexical repetition – documents containing 689,214 tokens consisted of only 3,000 types.¹⁶ By ranking frequency, he showed that the 50 most frequently used words comprised 50.9 percent of the total, “the top 100 words make up 67 percent, 200 words – 82 percent, 500 words – 94 percent.”¹⁷ Consequently, Kolgushkin argued the army’s lexicon was concise, or in his words, “the most refined, most pure military language.”¹⁸ To give an English comparison, Voice of America’s Special English uses about 1,500 words.¹⁹ It is worth noting that this is a controlled language designed to use a limited vocabulary but Russian in the army has developed a limited lexicon. Kolgushkin’s comparison with literature, where 400,000 tokens made up of 24,000 types, and radio, in which 200,000 tokens consisted of 10,000 types, is unfair.²⁰ Battle documents’ single field of discourse – war – allows for a limited lexicon. However, Kolgushkin’s statistics confirm the need for military dictionaries, because 25 percent of

¹² Mikhailin, “Army *Mat*,” pp. 8-9.

¹³ Igor V. Obraztsov, “Teaching Sociology in Military Educational Institutions in Russian,” *Armed Forces and Society* 35, no. 1 (2008), pp. 164-165.

¹⁴ Shpil’reyn, Reytnybnarg, and Netskiy, *Yazyk Krasnoarmeytsa*, p. 15.

¹⁵ Paul Baker, *Sociolinguistics and Corpus Linguistics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 20.

¹⁶ Kolgushkin, *Lingvistika v voyennom dele*, p. 95.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁹ *VOA Special English Work Book*, Washington D.C., 2009, p. 7.

²⁰ Kolgushkin, *Lingvistika v voyennom dele*, p. 95.

the 1,000 most frequent types were “purely military.”²¹ It is clear that ‘institutional’ Russian in the army has a limited, and specialized, lexicon.

Army syntax is also different from contemporary standard Russian. Using set or formulaic phrases, most commonly used in giving and receiving orders, sets army communication apart from civilian discourse. Films depict officers using the infinitive in place of the imperative from the Russian Civil War to the Soviet conflict in Afghanistan.²² In civilian contexts, “the imperative is often rendered by an infinitive form” in formal, institutional settings such as public notices to command or prohibit actions.²³ Responses to orders such as *tak tochno* or, more distinctively, the infinitive form of the verb *yest’* are similar to the English set phrase ‘yes, sir.’²⁴ Some syntax appears to be a product of conversion, “when a word which has hitherto functioned as a member of one class undergoes a shift which enables it to function as a member of another.”²⁵ While this process is “highly productive [in] modern English word-formation,” in Slavic languages “word-based word-class-changing conversion is rare.”²⁶ Consequently, the frequency of conversions distinguishes army discourse from civilian variations. Some adverbs seem to be used in place of verbs, such as *smirno* (quietly or submissively) for “[march to] attention!” or *zhivo* (vividly or lively) for “get a move on.”²⁷ Likewise, variations on the noun *marsh* are used in place of the verb to march.²⁸ Similarly, the noun *ogon’* is used rather than the more conventional verb *strelyat’* to order soldiers to open fire.²⁹ All of these apparent conversions can be explained as “the omission of a word or words whose meaning will be understood by listener and reader.”³⁰ That is, it is

²¹ Ibid., p. 65.

²² . . . *A Zori Zdes’ Tikhie; Ofitseri* (Officers), directed by Vladimir Rogovoy, Kinostudiya imeni Gor’kogo, 1971, DVD; 9 Rota.

²³ Derek Offord and Natalia Gogolitsyna, *Using Russian: A Guide to Contemporary Usage*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 209-210.

²⁴ *Ofitseri*; 9 Rota; Hill, *Russian–English, English–Russian Military Dictionary*, p. 101.

²⁵ Valerie Adams, *An Introduction to Modern English Word-formation* (London: Longman Group, 1973), p. 16.

²⁶ Christian Mair, *Twentieth-Century English: History, Variation, and Standardization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 45; Stella Manova, “Towards a Theory of Conversion in Slavic: Evidence from Bulgarian, Russian and Serbo-Croatian,” *Glossos* no. 6 (2005), p. 13.

²⁷ . . . *A Zori Zdes’ Tikhie*; Nekrasov, *Stalingrada*, 17; 9 Rota; Hill, *Russian–English, English–Russian Military Dictionary*, p. 357.

²⁸ *Ofitseri*; . . . *A Zori Zdes’ Tikhie*; 9 Rota.

²⁹ . . . *A Zori Zdes’ Tikhie*; 9 Rota.

³⁰ Offord and Gogolitsyna, *Using Russian*, p. xxv.

common to omit the verbs associated the adverbs and nouns when giving orders. The set phrases in the army are acceptable syntax within contemporary standard Russian but also make army syntax distinct from civilian discourse.

There is less evidence and discussion of the third level of language, phonology. Given the nature of sound, the only publicly available source is film. To be accessible to civilians, films contain minimal evidence that army communication is phonologically distinct. One would have to attempt warping data to contend that army phonology is distinct. Currently, the best phonological evidence comes from Red Army soldiers' letters during the Civil War. Twenty percent of spelling errors involved confusion of the unstressed vowels *a* and *o* or *ye* and *i*.³¹ This data can either be interpreted as proof of illiteracy or as phonological evidence. Russian orthography follows pronunciation closely; thus, these spelling errors might demonstrate the existence of standard pronunciation traits *akan'ye* and *ikan'ye*, confirming that soldiers' and civilians' phonology was the same. Alternatively, given the low literacy rates in pre-revolutionary Russia (24 percent in 1897) and the Tsarist army (35 percent), the high number of peasants in the Red Army (75-77.9 percent) and the low level of education for officers (94 percent of officer candidates in 1924 were educated at home or had no more than primary education), the high number of spelling errors confusing unstressed *a* and *o* or *ye* and *i* likely confirm illiteracy.³² In either case, there is little evidence that army communication is phonologically distinct.

Army Discourse as a Language Variety

According to Chambers, "the most productive studies in the four decades of sociolinguistic research have emanated from determining the social evaluation of linguistic variants."³³ Consequently, one must discuss army communication in terms of

³¹ Shpil'reyn, Reytynbarg, and Netskiy, *Yazyk Krasnoarmeytsa*, p. 58.

³² Larissa Ryazanova-Clarke and Terence Wade, *The Russian Language Today* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 15; Steven J. Main, "'We are not slaves, slaves we are not...' — the Role of the Red Army's Political Apparatus in Combating Illiteracy During the Russian Civil War (1918-1921)," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 9, no.3 (1996), p. 595; Steven J. Main, "The Red Army during the Russian Civil War, 1918–1920: The Main Results of the August 1920 Military Census," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 7, no. 4 (1994), pp. 802-803; Dale R. Herspring, *Russian civil-military relations* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 47.

³³ J.K. Chambers, "Studying Language Variation: An Informal Epistemology," in *The Handbook of*

language varieties before examining the interaction of discourse and society. The broadest classification of language variants is language. One aphorism defines a language as a matter of politics, “a language is a dialect with an army and a navy.” That is, the difference between a language and a dialect is “the result of political and cultural rather than purely linguistic factors.”³⁴ As such, related dialects are often treated as a single language if they are within one state but as separate languages if they are in independent states. A more useful distinction is mutual intelligibility; if both speakers understand each other, they speak the same language.³⁵ To argue that the army has its own language would mean that soldiers cannot communicate with civilians, contrary to the evidence found in film and literature.³⁶ Hence, Russian in the army is not its own language.

Another approach to classifying language varieties is to examine the speech community, a self-identifying group with similar speech characteristics.³⁷ Hypothetically, with a single “common language of international communication and cooperation” and conscription of “all male citizens . . . regardless of . . . racial and national affiliation, education [or] language,” the Soviet armed forces could be seen as a single speech community.³⁸ However, the Soviet army was divided by language skills, which were often connected to ethnicity. Without sufficient Russian skills, “advancement in the armed forces [was] ruled out.”³⁹ For example, 71.5 percent of all Marshals and political equivalents from 1935-1975 were native Russians.⁴⁰ By 1970, 62

Language Variation and Change, ed. J.K. Chambers, Peter Trudgill, and Natalie Schilling-Estes (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), p. 3.

³⁴ J. K. Chambers and Peter Trudgill, *Dialectology*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 9.

³⁵ Peter Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics: an introduction to language and society*, 4th ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 4; R. A Hudson, *Sociolinguistics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 35-36.

³⁶ . . . *A Zori Zdes' Tikhie; Ofitsery*; 9 Rota; Nekrasov, *Stalingrada*, pp. 58-61, 65-70.

³⁷ Hudson, *Sociolinguistics*, pp.24-26.

³⁸ M.B. Panov, “Russkiy Yazyk (Russian language),” in vol.1 of *Yazyk Narodov SSSR: Indoyevropeiskiy yazyki* (Languages of the USSR: Indo-European languages), ed. V.V. Vinogradov (Moscow: Nauka, 1966), p. 55; Ellen Jones, *The Red Army and society: a sociology of the Soviet military* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1985), p. 52.

³⁹ Shirin Akiner, “Uzbekistan: Republic of Many Tongues,” in *Language Planning in the Soviet Union*, ed. Michael Kirkwood (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), p. 115.

⁴⁰ Timothy Colton, *Commissars, Commanders and Civilian Authority: The Structure of Soviet Military Politics* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 261.

percent of non-Russians (29 percent of the total population) were not fluent in Russian.⁴¹ Therefore, in the late Soviet period, language skills stratified the ranks: Russians filled the officer corps, Ukrainians served as non-commissioned officers, and non-Russian speakers worked in non-combat roles such as construction or support units.⁴² Consequently, minorities grouped together because of their language skills, which raised concerns about nationalism.⁴³ Thus, ethnicity and varying levels of language skills created multiple speech communities, weakening the Soviet army.

According to Catford, since “the concept of a ‘whole language’ is so vast and heterogeneous that it is not operationally useful for many linguistics purposes ...it is ...desirable to have a framework of categories for the classification of ‘sub-languages,’ or *varieties* within a total language.”⁴⁴ These varieties are divided by user or by use.⁴⁵ In the case of user-defined varieties, or dialects, factors such as geography or social class shape one’s communication.⁴⁶ Extrapolating from major civilian Russian geographical dialects, which differ in their lexicon, syntax and phonology, one predicts the persistence of geographical dialects within the army.⁴⁷ Studies of Russian in the army do not discuss geographical differences, possibly because they are perceived as consistent with civilian dialects. The only way to use current data to look for geographical dialects would be to study the geographical distribution of ethnic slurs. For example, the majority of Alexiev and Wimbush’s list of ethnic slurs refers to Central Asians.⁴⁸ But Likholtov’s geographically restricted study of Russian border guards’ slang does not include ethnic slurs regarding Central Asians.⁴⁹ This might prove that there is a geographic dialectal continuum of ethnic slurs or that Likholtov did not include racial slang in his study.

⁴¹ Herbert Goldhamer, *The Soviet soldier: Soviet military management at the troop level* (New York: Crane, Russak & Co. 1975), p. 189.

⁴² Rasma Karkins, *Ethnic Relations in the USSR: The perspective from below* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1986), p. 120; Alex Alexiev and S. Enders Wimbush, eds., *Ethnic minorities in the Red Army: asset or liability?* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), pp. 167, 173.

⁴³ Herspring, *Russian civil-military relations*, pp. 114-115.

⁴⁴ J. C. Catford, *A Linguistic Theory of Translation: An Essay in Applied Linguistics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 83. Catford’s italics.

⁴⁵ M.A.K. Halliday, *Language and Society*, ed. Jonathan J. Webster (London and New York: Continuum, 2007), pp. 7, 16.

⁴⁶ Catford, *Linguistic Theory of Translation*, p. 85.

⁴⁷ Paul Cubberley, *Russian: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 313-331; Chambers and Trudgill, *Dialectology*, p. 5; Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics*, p. 5.

⁴⁸ Alexiev and Wimbush, *Ethnic minorities*, pp. 255-256.

⁴⁹ Likholtov, “Russkiy voyennyi zhargon,” pp. 190, 218-238.

Likewise, none of the studies examine the role of social class or status, which could confirm the existence of social dialects within the army.⁵⁰ Currently, the lack of data does not explain the nature of Russian civilian geographical or social dialects in the army.

The other option when organizing varieties, by use, acknowledges that “the language we speak changes in order to fit the situation we are in.”⁵¹ That is, individuals adapt their language to suit the situation and code-switch from one situational variety, or register, to another accordingly.⁵² Joos argues that speakers move between frozen, formal, consultative, casual and intimate levels of speech to better suit the circumstance.⁵³ Halliday gives a multi-dimensional definition of registers, by examining their style, mode and field of discourse.⁵⁴ Style “refers to the relations among the participants” and corresponds with Joos’ scale.⁵⁵ The mode is the medium by which one communicates, such as spoken or written discourse.⁵⁶ Finally, the field is “what is going on,” the activity occurring or the subject being discussed.⁵⁷ According to Halliday, changing any one of these aspects will create a new register. Each register can be classified by its place on each of these three scales. In other words, if each of these scales is an axis on a Cartesian coordinate system for a three-dimensional space, then any given point is a distinct register. Rather than being simple scales with discrete points, each axis is actually a spectrum. Thus, speakers have many, potentially infinite, ways to adapt their communication in any situation.

Consequently, army discourse appears to be a series of registers. The previously discussed data best fits the framework of situation-based registers. Whereas user-based varieties tend to differ in lexicon, syntax and phonology, “register-*markers* are chiefly *lexical ...and grammatical.*”⁵⁸ The lexical and syntactic evidence combined with the absence of phonologically distinct markers keep army discourse from being defined as a language or dialect, but confirms that it is a series of registers. That most of the

⁵⁰ Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics*, pp.24-30.

⁵¹ Alan Davies, “The Notion of Register,” *Educational Review* 22, no. 1 (1969), p. 69.

⁵² Hudson, *Sociolinguistics*, pp.52-53.

⁵³ Martin Joos, *The Five Clocks* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. 1967), p. 11.

⁵⁴ Halliday, *Language and Society*, p. 19.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵⁸ Catford, *Linguistic Theory of Translation*, p. 90. Catford’s italics.

distinctions are lexical is to be expected; in Halliday's words, "purely grammatical distinctions between registers are less striking."⁵⁹ Each of the major studies of Russian in the army highlight different situations and corresponding registers, though they do not refer to it as registers. Shpil'reyn et al compared the spoken and written lexicon of two cohorts of soldiers with their political guides. In addition to noting that political guides tended to have larger lexicons than soldiers, likely due to their better education, Shpil'reyn et al argue that "the same people speak and write completely differently."⁶⁰ Kolgushkin examined battle documents, a more institutional register.⁶¹ Nekrasov demonstrated the stilted, formulaic register of official reports with its short-form adjectives and passive verbs, "Completed in the course of the night – so many rifle trenches, so many mortar positions, dug-outs, minefields, losses, – so and so, destroyed in the same period – this and this . . ." ⁶² Likholtov studied the spoken and written slang of Border Guards including life in the barracks, offering a view of soldiers as they relaxed off duty.⁶³ Code-switching, changing from one register to another, is consistent with soldiers' ability to move between army and civilian registers. Viewing communication in the army as a series of registers also conforms to sociolinguists' research of occupation-specific registers.⁶⁴ All the data and research shows that Russian communication in the army is a series of registers.

Why Army Discourse is Distinct

Army discourse is distinct for linguistic, historical and cultural reasons. Kolgushkin argues that combat registers require precision and should reduce the number of different interpretations.⁶⁵ For an English language example, the command to 'shift fire' (to move) might be confused with 'lift fire' (to cease).⁶⁶ This practical need for

⁵⁹ Halliday, *Language and Society*, p. 17.

⁶⁰ Shpil'reyn, Reytynbarg, and Netskiy, *Yazyk Krasnoarmeytsa*, pp. 22, 119.

⁶¹ Kolgushkin, *Lingvistika v voyennom dele*, p. 41.

⁶² Nekrasov, *Front-line*, p. 242.

⁶³ Likholtov, "Russkiy voyenny zhargon," p. 27.

⁶⁴ Charles A. Ferguson, "Sports announcer talk: Syntactic aspects of register variation," *Language in Society* 12, no. 2 (1983), pp. 153-172; Elda Weizman, "Some Register Characteristics of Journalistic Language: Are they Universals?" *Applied Linguistics* 5, no. 1 (1984), pp. 39-50.

⁶⁵ Kolgushkin, *Lingvistika v voyennom dele*, p. 10.

⁶⁶ Michael Dane Acord, "Words matter: terms used incorrectly can cause confusion," *Infantry Magazine* (2004), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0IAV/is_ai_n6366541 (accessed October 10, 2008).

clear communication might explain some examples of conversions, notably the use of the noun to fire in place of the verb. *Strelyat'* contains consonant clusters which are more difficult to project than simpler back, mid-low vowels like in the noun *ogon'*. Thus linguistic functionality might explain why army communication has acquired some of its unique traits.

Army registers are distinct from civilian counterparts not only for functional, linguistic reasons but also because of the army's history and culture. In general, the army is culturally distinct because of the European regimental system. According to Keegan, regiments were "founded to isolate society's disruptive elements for society's good. . . . They ended by isolating themselves from society altogether, differentiated by their own rules, rituals and disciplines."⁶⁷ Consequently, "regiments were wholly different in ethos from that of the civil society in which they were garrisoned."⁶⁸ Partridge, a lexicographer of slang, agrees that the army's separate culture creates the army's registers, "Among members of a Service there is a kind of freemasonry, which expresses itself in many ways; not least in a speech of their own. . . . hence the special vocabulary."⁶⁹ Due to historical isolation, regiments created their own cultural distinctions which continued into their language.

Differences in communication can also be used to separate groups. According to sources published in the last twenty years, slang and *mat* (profanity) are shibboleths in the Russian army. Likholtov calls this the ostracizing function of language, noting that "jargon serves as a means of linguistic isolation of different social and professional groups."⁷⁰ He adds that the more a group is closed off from outside influence, the more likely it is to have a specialized slang.⁷¹ Similarly, Mikhailin argues that "any – purely hypothetical – attempt to cling to 'normative' Russian speech will inevitably lead only to the experimenter being transferred to the pariah class."⁷² The use of army slang and *mat* reinforces the separate culture. Army registers are distinct from civilian counterparts because of functional linguistic advantages, historical isolation and cultural separation.

⁶⁷ John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 15.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁶⁹ Eric Partridge, ed., *A Dictionary of Forces' Slang, 1939–1945* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1948), p. ix.

⁷⁰ Likholtov, "Russkiy voyennyi zhargon," p. 65.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁷² Mikhailin, "Army Mat," p. 9.

The Role of Discourse in the Army

Another reason discourse is distinct is its role in the army. Critical discourse analysis, “the study of language in use,” combines interdisciplinary methods from “anthropology, philosophy, sociology, [and] social and cognitive psychology.”⁷³ According to critical discourse analysis, language is not only a social product, reflecting and reinforcing social structures and relations, but is also a social tool, expressing and resisting power.⁷⁴ For example, the army re-socializes individuals, creates new identities and places individuals in the asymmetrical hierarchy. To remain an effective fighting unit, power on the front lines is expressed overtly. Discourse reinforces this hierarchy through asymmetrical address forms. However, ambiguity in the hierarchy allows individuals to challenge the power structure through ambiguous discourse. Therefore, the army institutionalizes the precise discourse to preserve the hierarchy and maintain unit cohesion.

Hierarchy is the overwhelming feature of the Red Army’s social structure. Almost every interaction in film and literature is shaped by one’s place in the hierarchy, beginning with the army recasting individuals’ identities. For example, an officer in *9 Rota* instructs his new recruits, “Forget who you were and what you knew in civilian life. Remember, clones, here you are not bad or good, not smart or stupid; not artists and generally you’re no one. Here you are not even people. . . . But I will make you people with my own hands.”⁷⁵ That is, life before the army is to be forgotten so the officer can form new, real people, where their primary identity is determined by their role in the institution. New lexicon and modified syntax simultaneously reinforce the new identity and situate the speaker within the hierarchy.

The most pervasive way in which discourse reinforces the army’s hierarchy is the use of asymmetrical address forms. Social distance, corresponding to Halliday’s style spectrum, determines whether Russian speakers use the informal or formal second-person address forms.⁷⁶ The Provisional and Bolshevik governments prohibited soldiers from using the formal to address each other, yet in practice subordinates addressing

⁷³ Lenore A. Grenoble, “Discourse Analysis,” *Glossos* no. 8 (2006), p. 1.

⁷⁴ Mary Talbot, Karen Atkinson, and David Atkinson, *Language and Power in the Modern World* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2003), pp. 1-8, 36.

⁷⁵ *9 Rota*.

⁷⁶ Offord and Gogolitsyna, *Using Russian*, pp. 229-230.

superiors used the formal and superiors used either the formal or informal address form.⁷⁷ This allowed the senior officer to express power and junior officers to display respect. Therefore, asymmetrical address forms situate speakers within the asymmetrical power structure with every exchange.

Discourse can be used to challenge the hierarchy and its power. When seniority is apparent, power can be expressed overtly; when ambiguous, power is contestable. Diamond argues that speakers' rank may be institutional or local.⁷⁸ An individual's status in the institution would normally determine who exerts more power. In ambiguous circumstances, power can become more situational or, in Diamond's words, local. The protagonist in *V okopakh Stalingrada*, Kerzhentsev, acquires local power from equals and superiors. Kerzhentsev uses informality and small talk, to increase solidarity with another lieutenant and borrow men for a day to mine his battalion's defences.⁷⁹ Additionally, discourse can be used to challenge asymmetrical situations, which are created by the institution's hierarchy. For example, Kerzhentsev uses silence to covertly extract a more direct order from a colonel. His silence is indirect and mitigates the risk of losing face for expressing the misunderstanding, directly requesting information or even challenging the senior officer's orders.⁸⁰ Generally, negotiations are discouraged in military organizations, as demonstrated by the phrase *U matrosov net voprosov* (Sailors don't have questions). Silence is safer and provides the information Kerzhentsev requires to complete his orders, which direct confrontation with a senior officer would not. Thus, local power can be gained through discursive means when institutional power is ambiguous or even when addressing superiors.

Consequently, to reduce ambiguity, local power and internal resistance, the army institutionalizes its registers through training. Training ingrains semantic understanding, which should produce predictable responses to orders, necessary for military success. Therefore, training introduces lexicon and syntax required for 'institutional' army registers. Not all training is formalized; for example, according to

⁷⁷ Comrie, Stone, and Polinsky, *The Russian language in the twentieth century*, pp. 251-252.

⁷⁸ Julie Diamond, *Status and power in verbal interaction: A study of discourse in a close-knit social network* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1996), pp. 9-11.

⁷⁹ Nekrasov, *Stalingrada*, pp. 146-147; Nekrasov, *Front-line*, pp. 157-158.

⁸⁰ Nekrasov, *Stalingrada*, pp. 164-166; Nekrasov, *Front-line*, pp. 176-180.

Likholtov, group leaders have direct or indirect “‘vocal pressure’ on young soldiers.”⁸¹ Similarly, in Nekrasov’s work, the register of written reports was taught through training and the repetition of responding to senior officers’ flood of paperwork.⁸² The practice of superiors using either the formal or informal address forms, contrary to protocol, was likely taught indirectly. Whether taught formally or informally, the hierarchy, with its role in training, establishes and enforces the propagation of army registers. Training institutionalizes army registers, ensuring that they retain their distinct nature over time.

The Influence of Army Communication on Civilian Society

The study of discourse is also useful for ‘war and society’ scholars who seek “the nexus between armies and the societies that spawn them.”⁸³ The Red Army established the first Soviet literacy program, which was also the first comprehensive Russian literacy program, during the Civil War. Army service and Russian language acquisition was used to help ethnic groups assimilate in the Soviet Union. In turn, army discourse was incorporated into civilian society.

During the Civil War, the Red Army instituted the first Soviet literacy program. Local and ad hoc literacy schools, taught by political guides, began the Soviet literacy campaign.⁸⁴ By 1919, a semi-official system was instituted with clear goals. Those considered to be illiterate were to learn to read and write their name, unit name, address, a letter of a few words, and count to 1,000. When they achieved this level of semi-literacy, they were then taught to “read and write in their own words, a letter or official report, and to add and subtract up to 1,000.”⁸⁵ Subsequently, a political guide wrote a primer specifically for soldiers, which was also the first Soviet reader.⁸⁶ This literacy campaign was successful for individual soldiers and for the army as a whole. Veterans returned home with valuable skills, or as Reese states, “Lives were changed by

⁸¹ Likholtov, “Russkiy voyennyi zhargon,” p. 191.

⁸² Nekrasov, *Stalingrada*, p. 225.

⁸³ Robert M. Citino, “Military Histories Old and New: A Reintroduction,” *American Historical Review* 112, no. 4 (October 2007), p. 1070.

⁸⁴ Main, “Combating Illiteracy,” p. 598; Reese, *Soviet military experience*, p. 73.

⁸⁵ Main, “Combating Illiteracy,” p. 608.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 598.

the newly acquired ability to read and write.”⁸⁷ According to White Army officers, these Civil War literacy programs improved Red Army morale and cohesion.⁸⁸ In turn, industrialization under the Five-Year Plans increased the volume of technical jargon and Marshal M. N. Tukhachevskiy’s modernizing reforms prompted increased literacy and mathematics education.⁸⁹ Reese states succinctly, “For the Imperial Army, it was a luxury to have literate men; for the Red Army, it was a necessity because of the increased mechanization and technological sophistication of the armed forces.”⁹⁰ Of course, the literacy campaigns lagged behind other nations’ education programs. For example, in the 1930s, one-fifth of the Red Army could read and write brief letters but the British Army trained almost one-quarter of soldiers because they had less than five years of education.⁹¹ Though not spectacular by international standards, the Red Army literacy programs prior to the Great Patriotic War helped soldiers begin to read and write, and improved the army’s effectiveness. The army acted as a testing ground for future civilian Soviet literacy programs.

From the 1960s, as ethnicity became an increasingly divisive issue in the Soviet Union, army service served as “an important mechanism for breaking down regional, ethnic, and tribal loyalties.”⁹² In 1979, Rakowska-Harmstone observed, “In the multi-ethnic Soviet society the Soviet army is undoubtedly one of the most important instruments of national integration, but the model to which Soviet soldiers are assimilated is basically a Russian soldier.”⁹³ Russian was the logical language choice in the Soviet Union to preserve a functioning army and, by 1990, the use of Russian was “absolutely essential in the modern Soviet army.”⁹⁴ Consequently, “Russian language

⁸⁷ Roger R. Reese, *Stalin's reluctant soldiers: a social history of the Red Army, 1925–1941* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas, 1996), p. 95.

⁸⁸ Mark Von Hagen, *Soldiers in the proletarian dictatorship: the Red Army and the Soviet socialist state, 1917–1930* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 113-114.

⁸⁹ Dennis Ward, *The Russian language today: system and anomaly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 20; Reese, *Soviet military experience*, p. 73.

⁹⁰ Reese, *Stalin's reluctant soldiers*, p. 82.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

⁹² Jones, *The Red Army and society*, pp. 185-186.

⁹³ Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone, “The Soviet Army and the Instrument of National Integration,” in *Soviet Military Power and Performance*, ed. John Erickson and E. J. Feuchtwanger (London & Basingstroke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1979), p. 129.

⁹⁴ Isabelle T. Kreindler, “Soviet Language Planning since 1953,” in *Language Planning in the Soviet Union*, ed. Michael Kirkwood (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), p. 58.

study circles” and “societies for the study of the Russian language” were created to improve non-Russians’ fluency.⁹⁵ As a result, army service improved the language skill of ethnic minorities. For example, 7.6 percent of Uzbeks from towns and 11.4 percent from villages learned Russian in the army. After a year, they were not fluent, but at least seemed competent.⁹⁶ Indeed, depending on which survey is used, army service was either the second or third most effective place for strengthening language assimilation, after school or after school and work contacts.⁹⁷ Though these assimilation and fluency programs were not always successful, forcing the army to adapt to various levels of fluency, they exemplify how the army and its communication influenced the broader Soviet society.

The transfer of army communication to civilian life also exemplifies why army discourse is valuable to understanding Soviet culture. This transfer is clearest in the first half of the twentieth century. According to Gorham, the militarization of everyday language and neologisms such as acronyms and stump-compounds, increased between 1919 and 1929.⁹⁸ Part of the reason for this was the increased use of telegraphs and telegraphic code during World War I, leading to the use of abbreviations in battle reports, commands and ranks.⁹⁹ Comrie argues that acronyms and stump-compounds were meant to speed up telegraph communication and, although acronyms were barely pronounceable, allowed efficient communication.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, Stone contends “the briefest acquaintance with Stalinist political language finds it awash with campaigns, battles, and fronts – military phrases for civil life growing directly from the legacy of the civil war.”¹⁰¹ Examples of military expressions moving into civilian rhetoric include “the forefront in the fight to increase sugar-beet production” and a “private in the army of Soviet scientists.”¹⁰² This demonstrates the “breakdown of distinctions between military

⁹⁵ Herspring, *Russian civil-military relations*, p. 116; Goldhamer, *The Soviet soldier: Soviet military management at the troop level*, p. 196.

⁹⁶ Akiner, “Uzbekistan: Republic of Many Tongues,” p. 118.

⁹⁷ Jones, *The Red Army and society, 1917*; Rakowska-Harmstone, “National Integration,” p. 147.

⁹⁸ Michael S. Gorham, *Speaking in Soviet tongues: language, culture and the politics of voice in revolutionary Russia* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), p. 24.

⁹⁹ Ryazanova-Clarke and Wade, *The Russian Language Today*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁰ Comrie, Stone, and Polinsky, *The Russian language in the twentieth century*, p. 192.

¹⁰¹ David Stone, *Hammer and Rifle: The Militarization of the Soviet Union, 1926-1933* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2000), p. 9.

¹⁰² Comrie, Stone, and Polinsky, *The Russian language in the twentieth century*, p. 224; Ryazanova-Clarke and Wade, *The Russian Language Today*, p. 28.

and civil spheres” and “the transfer of military culture . . . to civilian life” in the militarization of the Soviet Union.¹⁰³ Literacy programs, language acquisition and military lexicon illustrate the military’s influence on civilian discourse and society, confirming that the study of military linguistics would benefit civilian anthropologists and linguists.

Military Linguistics

Overall, communication in the Red and Soviet Armies was lexically and, to a certain extent, syntactically distinct. Generally, army discourse is insufficiently distinct to be classified as its own language, speech community or dialect. It appears to be best classified as a series of registers, in which speakers adapt their discourse to the situation based on the social distance between speakers, the medium of communication and the activity or subject discussed. Thus, speakers can move freely between multiple civilian and military registers. Distinctions between army and civilian discourse exist because of functional linguistic advantages, historical isolation and cultural separation. Discourse reinforces new identities and one’s place in the hierarchical system. Through formal and informal training, this communication is institutionalized, which both maintains discourse’s distinct nature and preserves the hierarchy. In the Soviet case, the army influenced civilian life through the development of literacy and fluency programs, and the militarization of civilian discourse.

This article’s weaknesses confirm the need for further work in the field of military linguistics.. This study was conducted by a history student with some linguistics training rather than a by linguist with an interest in strategic studies. Hopefully, more linguists will use their technical skills to improve on these interpretations. Similarly, using more chronologically, geographically and culturally complete data would improve the reliability of the results. Instead of being based on a few focused studies, augmented with fiction designed for civilian consumption, military linguistics will require field work to gain more accurate data. Using recordings, in addition to written sources, will ensure that lexical, syntactic and phonological evidence is documented. Ideally, these studies would strive for breadth and depth by using a

¹⁰³ Stone, *Hammer and Rifle*, p. 9.

large sample size and include details down to the platoon or section level. Information about the speakers' ethnicities, geographical origins, and roles would help researchers understand the nature of civilian geographical and social dialects within the military. Another area for study, which has not been discussed in this study due to a lack of data, is gender. Improved data sets would help expand on Disler's work on discourse and gender in the United States' Air Force.¹⁰⁴ Investigating discourse in multiple situations could explain the quantities and nature of military registers. For example, recordings of exercises and combat could explain how the experience of training differs from the reality of war. Whether this could be used to improve the effectiveness of training is beyond the scope of this article. Other results could include the extent to which specific units display their own registers, how second language skills are expressed and under what conditions individuals switch between registers.

Increased research and improved data might also confirm theoretical challenges in this study. Critical discourse analysis is a useful tool but, like using a scalpel to fell a tree, it is almost too subtle to examine the army's overt power and transparent communication. Talbot, Atkinson and Atkinson's discussion of "how [social security] applicants are recast into category types that suit the bureaucratic demands of the organisation they encounter" cannot compare with the re-socialization of new recruits.¹⁰⁵ It seems unlikely that the "styling and monitoring [of] employees' talk . . . [at] call centres," which Talbot et al consider "institutional control at its extreme" are as severe as the possibilities in the military.¹⁰⁶ Critical discourse analysis was developed to examine covert power in civilian settings and might be more beneficial in parts of the military where politics and power become more covert than the frontlines. However, critical discourse analysis is a useful starting place in evaluating the role of discourse in the army. Perhaps as the field of military linguistics grows, it will produce new theories which will benefit those studying civilian communication.

Further studies could examine discourse within a specific nation and provide valuable inter-service comparisons. For example, Partridge claimed at the end of World War II that the Air Force "added rather more terms to its vocabulary than have the other

¹⁰⁴ Edith A. Disler, *Language and Gender in the Military: Honorifics, Narrative, and Ideology in Air Force Talk* (Amherst, New York: Cambria Press, 2008).

¹⁰⁵ Talbot, Atkinson, and Atkinson, *Language and Power*, p. 78.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

two Services” and that the “Navy’s slang [was] the most traditional.”¹⁰⁷ Not only could further study determine how true Partridge’s statement is today, but could also explain some of the cultural differences between services. Additional comparisons could examine how service on the front line, as opposed to in support roles, changes discourse. Further study could examine institutions with similar needs to express “more information in fewer symbols,” such as civilian emergency services.¹⁰⁸ Or, for a closer comparison, it would be worthwhile to evaluate the extent to which a military surgeon’s discourse overlaps with a similar civilian surgeon’s. Military linguistics could be used to study a nation’s services and civil-military relations.

The potential for “cross-linguistic evaluations” are even more profitable.¹⁰⁹ Comparing general trends from one language with others could determine the extent to which traits such as lexical repetition and formulaic phrases are universal. This could be done by studying those with similar roles, such as engineers, in different languages and militaries. Another approach would use historical perspectives, like the influence of Prussian and Dutch communication on the Imperial Russian Army, to examine the origin of cross-linguistic similarities. An additional option would contrast discourse of allies which commonly cooperate on joint operations, such as Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, with other English-speaking nations, like India. These broad generalizations, although methodologically difficult, could produce a “wide range of implications for fruitful collaboration with a number of other disciplines, in particular those that study the context within which language structure functions.”¹¹⁰ Indeed, by examining the intersection of language and war, military linguistics would benefit both linguistics and strategic studies.

¹⁰⁷ Partridge, *A Dictionary of Forces’ Slang, 1939–1945*, p. x.

¹⁰⁸ Kolgushkin, *Lingvistika v voyennom dele*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁹ Bernard Comrie, *Language Universals and Linguistic Typology: Syntax and Morphology*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. x.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 232.

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