

Cynthia Scott

Dr. Elizabeth Swingrover

Language and Literacy, Engl 282

Defending Air Force Language Skills

Military language is under attack. Several news columnists and language experts disapprove of the words used by the military to describe the activities of war. Some of them also criticize basic writing skills of the military. I will respond to those accusations by showing how and why the military, especially Air Force personnel, use the language in question. I will also describe Air Force tools that help members develop better writing and speaking skills. Article reprints in *Exploring Language* started me on this military writing defense crusade. The first arrow came from a newspaper columnist.

Boston Globe columnist Bella English accused the military of poor language skills when she wrote an article at the end of Operation Desert Storm titled “When Words Go To War.” She claimed “it goes against the military grain to speak in simple English. I mean, why use one word when 10 will do? And heaven forbid you should call something by its real name” (235). She wasn’t the first to complain. Concern over military language began well before the Persian Gulf skirmish.

In 1984, Haig Bosmajian, a professor of speech communication, expressed dismay over language from the Reagan administration and the Pentagon that disguises the horrors of war. In his article *Dehumanizing People and Euphemizing War*, he quoted a statement by Robert McFarlane, Reagan’s national security adviser (not actually in the military): “The use of force can never be our preference or our only choice. It cannot yet be discarded, however, as an instrument of policy...We must be prepared to deal with low-intensity conflict in whatever form

it takes.” Bosmajian feels that abstract expressions like low-intensity conflicts, risk-taking, management of power, and instrument of policy-- are too vague to describe war and killing (219).

William Lutz refers to such military euphemisms as doublespeak. In his book *The New Doublespeak: Why No One Knows What Anyone's Saying Anymore*, he wrote more than two pages of narrative defining the unspoken meanings of these seemingly neutral words. The substitute words he listed for delivering bombs included visit a site, disruption, operation and area denial. He also mentioned bombing action words such as degrade, neutralize, suppress, eliminate, cleanse, sanitize, take out, and damage (184-186).

We use neutral language to avoid emotive words, according to Patrick Hurley. In his book about logical arguments, Hurley explains that “Language associated with military ventures often calls forth negative emotions. To counteract this effect, military spokespersons are trained to describe those ventures in terms that evoke a neutral response. For example, human targets are referred to as *soft targets*, and napalm, which is aimed at human targets, is called *soft ordnance*. Dropping bombs is called *servicing a site*, saturation bombing is *terrain alteration*, and bombers are called *force packages*” (76).

John Leo refers to this kind of language as “Pentagonese,” and says it “favors oxymorons (*Peace-keeper missiles, build-down*) ...” (100). Of all the remarks by critics, his was the mildest and briefest comment on military language. His article *Journalese as A Second Language*, poked fun at the phrases journalists use and abuse.

Because I am a member of the military (Nevada Air National Guard), I was a little surprised and offended by these charges against military language. I wondered if I could find an agency responsible for disseminating those neutralized war-words. Were any military people actually

trained to use those words, as Hurley stated? Whether or not those questions could be answered, I still wanted to argue against the claim that military language skills are lacking. I began by searching for information on Army training programs.

The Army has one regulation that provides guidance on preparing and managing correspondence. It starts with: “Department of the Army writing will be clear, concise and effective. ...Effective and efficient writing is writing that can be understood in a single rapid reading and is generally free of errors in grammar, mechanics, and usage” (Para 1-12). Although most of the manual dictates the use of various official forms and memos, there is one section devoted to style and word usage.

Section II of Appendix F concerns two-part words. “A compound word conveys a unit idea that is not as clearly conveyed by separate words. The hyphen not only unites but separates the component words to aid readability and correct pronunciation.” The Army manual first explains basic rules for using hyphens. “Omit the hyphen when words appear in regular order and the omission causes no confusion in sound or meaning.” Their examples include *banking hours*, *blood pressure*, *eye opener*, *fellow citizen*. Explanation continues with “Compound two or more words to express an idea that would not be as clearly expressed in separate words.” Examples: *afterglow*, *bookkeeping*, *cupboard*, *newsprint* (Apndx F, Sect II).

Next, the Army cautions writers against using “unnecessary combinations of words.” Their warning is about redundancy. These are their examples of combinations to avoid: *atomic energy power*, *child welfare plan*, *income tax form*, *parcel post delivery*, *social security pension*, and *special delivery mail*. A related warning concerns ambiguity: “Do not confuse a modifier with the word it modifies.” [Examples:] “*wooden-shoe maker* [not *wooden shoe-maker*], *average taxpayer* / *income-tax payer*, *American flagship* / *American-flag ship*” (Apndx F, Sect II).

The Air Force provides much more guidance than the Army. Several years before the end of the Vietnam War, the Secretary of the Air Force believed that many of the problems between the Air Force and the Department of Defense could be blamed on poor communication. The Air Force began to remedy that situation by publishing instruction manuals on better writing and speaking skills. Air Force Pamphlet (AFP)13-5 (published in 1980) begins with this preface:

WHY WRITE WELL? Write well because so many readers are at your mercy.... Give those readers a break. They can throw away a bad sales letter, but they have to read your official one. Write well because poor writing hurts more than readers. A confusing instruction can wreck a plane. A clumsy evaluation can wreck the career of a fine subordinate. At its worst, poor writing leads to lives lost and programs rejected. (v)

Contrary to the claim by Bella English, we are not taught to write ten words when one will do. The Air Force Effective Writing Course featured several sections on word count reduction :

AVOIDING NEEDLESS WORDS

Doublings: Avoid writing about a project's *importance and significance* when *importance* will do. Pairs of words with similar meanings add needless bulk to writing.

"It is": No two words hurt Air Force writing more than the innocent-looking *it is*. They stretch sentences, delay your point, and encourage passive verbs. ...Less common but no less wordy are cousins of *it is like*, *there is* and *there are*.

Smothered Verbs: Don't use a general verb (*make*) plus extra words (*a choice*) when you can use one specific verb (*choose*).

held a meeting	met
give consideration to	consider
give their approval to	approve

“That” and “Which”: Don’t use *that* and *which* unless they help meaning or flow. Sometimes you can just drop these words: “We believe ~~that~~ the changes ~~which~~ they asked for won’t raise costs.” ...Check each *that* and *which* to make sure you need it.

Hut-2-3-4 Phrases: Don’t build ... long trains of nouns and modifiers. Readers can’t tell easily what modifies what or when such trains will end. You may have to use official hut-2-3-4 phrases like “Air Traffic Control Radar Beacon System,” but you can avoid creating unofficial ones like “increased high-cost-area allowances.” (31)

AFP 13-5 also provides two pages of “Simpler Words and Phrases” to help us avoid words that are too long. The second column suggests alternatives for the long words in the first column. Here are a few samples:

Afford an opportunity	allow, let
Consequently	so
Disseminate	issue, send out
Encourage	urge
Fundamental	basic
Has the capability	can (69-70)

AFP 13-5 is a condensed version of a much bigger Air Force Handbook (AFH) 37-137 called *The Tongue and Quill*. This is a 240-page manual containing basic direction for clear communication such as analyzing purpose and audience, conducting research, organizing material, composing drafts, editing, and seeking feedback. *The Tongue and Quill* guides us through several writing formats: official memo, personal letter, in-turn memo, memorandum for record, background paper, bullet background paper, position paper, staff summary sheet, talking paper, and trip reports. It explains the mechanics of writing, including punctuation, abbreviation, capitalization, numbers, and how to cite sources (Table of Contents).

All Air Force and Air National Guard officers and non-commissioned officers (staff sergeants, technical sergeants, master sergeants and above) use *The Tongue and Quill* when they attend required professional military education courses. Communication skills are very important leadership skills. Administrative personnel consider it an important office tool also.

We are encouraged to speak and write in simple English. *The Tongue and Quill* has a full section devoted to the abolishment of *bureaubaffle*. It defines bureaubaffle as “a serious disease for most Air Force writers and speakers. Bureaubaffle is a viral epidemic with any one or a combination of the following symptoms: big words, long sentences, jargon, and lots of passive voice” (3). To get us into a receptive mood for trimming our bureaubaffle, *The Tongue and Quill* offers this bit of long-winded whimsy:

THREE BLIND MICE

(translated for bureaucrats)

A triumvirate of optically deficient rodents

Observe how they perambulate!

They all perambulated after the horticulturist’s spouse,

Who removed their posterior appendages with a culinary instrument.

Have you ever observed such a visual phenomenon in your cumulative metabolic process

As a triumvirate of optically deficient rodents?

From Mother’s Goosed Rhymes

By *The Quill* (4)

This poem is a perfect example of big word *gobbledygook*. It ignores the “Simpler Words and Phrases” section of the manual. *The Tongue and Quill* says “Gobbledygook is merely puffy sentences used to fill space and impress the naïve. You see a lot of it in performance reports, staff reports, budget requests, and recommendations for awards” (35). I must agree with this; puffy sentences are a trademark of formal citations that accompany awards and decorations. We even have a training course and an Air Force Instruction (AFI) that provide templates for writing

such award citations. Here is a section from AFI 36-2803, *The Air Force Awards and Decorations Program*:

A4.13. Air Force Commendation Medal:

A4.13.1. Opening Sentence. Staff Sergeant Lisa A. Ducharme distinguished herself by (meritorious service) OR (outstanding achievement) OR (an act of courage) as (duty assignment and office) OR (while assigned to _____ (office) from _____ to _____).

A4.13.3. Narrative Description (Service or Achievement). During this period, the professional skill, leadership, and ceaseless efforts of Sergeant Ducharme contributed to the effectiveness and success of Air Force programs.

A4.13.4. Closing Sentence. The distinctive accomplishments of Sergeant Ducharme reflect credit upon herself and the United States Air Force. (57)

Keeping the template in mind, take a look at the underlined parts of this real (but edited) award citation. It violates all cautions against passive tense and flowery formula phrases:

Master Sergeant _____ distinguished herself by outstanding achievement while assigned to the 152d Logistics Support Flight, Nevada Air National Guard, Reno, Nevada, from 2 March 1997 to 30 September 1998. During this period, Sergeant _____'s initiative, resourcefulness, and untiring efforts substantially increased the efficiency and effectiveness of her section. Her vast computer knowledge and meticulous attention to detail resulted in the creation and development of several remarkably useful databases and spreadsheets. These greatly enhanced the ability to gather and analyze information in areas such as.... Sergeant _____'s devotion to duty and to mission success led to the formation of a Working Group to discuss problems or concerns involving the.... With untiring effort, she reorganized Cost Center Identification Codes to comply with Air National Guard Readiness Center guidelines. Displaying professional competence, Sergeant _____ assisted the Wing Plans office with development of forms and instructions for Personnel Accountability Kits. ...In addition, the creation of ...can be directly attributed to her dedication to the unit and its heritage. The distinctive accomplishments of Sergeant _____ reflect credit upon herself, the Air National Guard and the United States Air Force.

It is obvious, at least in this case, that the directions from one part of the Air Force (*Tongue and Quill*) contradict the instructions from another part – the awards program. Even so, I think a little puffery and formality is appropriate sometimes. Who wants an award that simply says “you’ve done a good job,” and nothing more? Pomp and circumstance have their place.

Jargon is another part of bureaubaffle. We (in the Air Force) are aware of the jargon jungle. *The Tongue and Quill* defines the term and warns against using it in the wrong places. “Jargon consists of shorthand words, phrases, or abbreviations that are peculiar to a relatively small group of people. ... When you use jargon make sure you have carefully assessed the audience!” (35)

Some of the jargon I use at the Nevada Air National Guard as a Logistics Plans Technician includes *echelon*, *increment*, *mobility*, *loggie*, *Logmod*, and *target load* (a budget term). Much of my jargon is meaningless to aircraft maintenance personnel, and I don’t understand everything they talk about. There is no single list of military jargon. That is why we must be careful about using it, even within the Air Force.

Abbreviations and acronyms are a part of jargon. *The Tongue and Quill* reminds us that abbreviations are a “common form of false economy” (39). We are instructed to spell a term completely the first time we use it before substituting an abbreviation. If the term isn’t going to appear repeatedly in a document, don’t abbreviate at all. After reducing jargon, we must attack one more part of bureaubaffle: buzz words.

The Tongue and Quill describes a buzz word “formula” invented by a US Public Health Service employee. Philip Broughton calls his device a “Systematic Buzz Phrase Projector.” He arranged thirty words into three columns, numbering each word 0-9 in each column. A person needing an impressive-sounding buzz phrase just thinks of any three-digit number to select the

corresponding words from each column. Using these in a report gives you a voice of authority.

The author says “No one will have the remotest idea of what you’re talking about, but the important thing is they’re not about to admit it” (48). Here’s the Buzz Phrase Projector:

<u>Column 1</u>	<u>Column 2</u>	<u>Column 3</u>
0. integrated	0. Management	0. Options
1. total	1. Organizational	1. Flexibility
2. systematized	2. Monitored	2. Capability
3. parallel	3. Reciprocal	3. Mobility
4. functional	4. Digital	4. Programming
5. responsive	5. Logistical	5. Concept
6. optional	6. Transitional	6. Time-phase
7. synchronized	7. incremental	7. Projection
8. compatible	8. Third-generation	8. Hardware
9. balanced	9. Policy	9. Contingency

Using the numbers 5-8-2, I get the phrase “responsive third-generation capability.” This is a wonderful device; I think it’s fun to use for chuckles. If *The Tongue and Quill* weren’t trying to dissuade us from using such a thing, we’d probably be spouting hundreds of such phrases just for fun. Despite cautions against it, some military people may be using buzz words to sound important, especially in media interviews. If they are doing so, it’s not with any guidance or approval from Air Force public affairs personnel.

Air Force Public Affairs specialists would not have invited NATO commander Alexander Haig, for instance, to face news reporters in the early 1980s. Several of his famous public statements such as “longstanding in time,” “We must use careful caution,” and “I’ll have to caveat my response, senator,” demonstrate poor language skills (English 235). Air Force Public Affairs specialists have instructions for avoiding such embarrassing gaffes during interviews.

Air Force Instruction 35-206, which is a guide for Media Relations, says we should “Find the appropriate official who can speak on the subject without further clearance and who expresses thoughts clearly and briefly” (18). There is even guidance for preparing VIPs ahead of

time. “If the interviewee is a general officer who has not attended a Speakers Training Seminar conducted by SAF/PAM (or at MAJCOM level), try to arrange such a session prior to the interview” (18). Public Affairs personnel themselves strive to communicate effectively, in a professional manner that will give Americans a favorable image of the Air Force.

Professionalism in language is important for more than just image purposes. The Air Force publishes a quarterly collection of articles by scientists, military theorists, historians, and retired military authors in the *Airpower Journal*. The masthead indicates “It [the journal] is designed to serve as an open forum for the presentation and stimulation of innovative thinking on military doctrine, strategy, tactics, force structure, readiness, and other matters of national defense.”

The *Airpower Journal* recommends a style manual developed for all Air Force writers, which is available on the world wide web. It is called the *Air University Style Guide for Writers and Editors*. The editors acknowledge that many other style manuals exist but try to make life simpler by tailoring one with just the Air Force perspective. “The basic tenets of English usage are the same for Air Force writers as for writers ‘on the outside,’ of course, but audiences are different, terminology is specialized, and Air Force readers are attuned to their own language and its rhythms” (preface).

Modern military language does include the term *peace keeper*. Although it doesn’t make sense of John Leo’s reference to peace keeper *missile*, an article from the *Airpower Journal* explains the general concept of the term. The authors, Abigail Gray-Briggs and Michael MacIver, explore the relatively new culture and mind set needed for Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW). In one part of their ten-page essay, they refer to *Doctrine for Joint Operations* (Joint Pub 3-0) which lists eight specific types of MOOTW ranging from Arms Control, Noncombatant Evacuation Operations, and Support to Insurgencies, to Peace

Operations. Peace Operations “refers to three types of activities: peacemaking (which focuses on diplomatic actions), peace enforcement (which focuses on coercive use of military force), and peacekeeping (which focuses on non-combat military operations)” (17). We use these well-defined labels as shorthand; one word can replace a whole phrase.

In an essay about the importance of Information Warfare, another *Airpower Journal* author says it is not enough that we have the latest and best hardware technology to fight wars. Carla Bass describes how Information Warfare [propaganda] is used by our “adversaries [to] expertly manipulate the media, leveraging them against our well-publicized lack of tolerance for American bloodshed or ill treatment of a ‘defenseless’ people” (31). This “lack of tolerance” may be the reason military speakers use neutral labels when describing events to the public.

Bosmajian worries that neutral military labels distort the public’s perception of war. If we use words that graphically represent the horrors of war, as Bosmajian suggests, Americans might not allow their government to enter such activities. That’s a debatable point. I don’t think there is an ulterior motive. The military is just telling Americans what they want to hear in a way they prefer to hear it. Military speakers and writers, who are also Americans, use those same words to communicate with each other. It’s not a conspiracy, and it doesn’t affect all the military.

The majority of Air Force and Air National Guard personnel work very far away from battle sites and high-risk areas. The behind scenes support we provide to war fighters is so indirect that we don’t often think of ourselves as warriors or even soldiers. Most of the euphemistic war words mentioned by Lutz and Hurley appear to be mission related. The words in question are the tools of war planners, war fighters and battle-scene analysts. Air Force workers who maintain aircraft, provide services, take care of finances, handle personnel matters,

and perform a myriad of other tasks not directly related to flying do not discuss bombing, destruction, and casualties.

The issue of what list of words we should use to describe war and all its mayhem makes me wonder how those words came into use. Did a group of high officials sit in a back room of the Pentagon and decide to color war less bloody? Are the euphemisms scorned by Lutz, Bosmajian and English a product of conscious policy? I was unable to find answers to those questions. I can only guess that depersonalization of war words is a normal trend representative of our culture. We say what we think and we think what we hear. It's a cycle perpetuated by our own subconscious desire to avoid thinking too deeply about unpleasant things.

Emotive issues aside, I have shown that mechanical language skills are a very important part of the Air Force working environment. Clear communication is emphasized at every level. We have guidelines and standards for every publication and for other media as well. When less-than-perfect statements reach the public media, it's not because of poor standards or lack of training. It is not accurate or fair of news columnists and linguists to color all the military with a "Pentagonese" paintbrush.

Statement of Originality

In writing this paper, I have cited the sources of all phrases not my own. When summarizing or paraphrasing the ideas of others, I have tried to follow the anti-plagiarism rules set forth by the Modern Language Association. I used *A Pocket Style Manual*, 2nd edition, by Diana Hacker for my guide in these matters.

Signed _____

Cynthia L. Scott

Works Cited

- Air University Style Guide for Writers and Editors*. Preface. OPR: Marvin Bassett 17 Aug. 1998. <<http://www.au.af.mil/au/oas/aupress/style>>.
- Bass, Carla D. "Building Castles on Sand: Underestimating the Tide of Information Operations." *Airpower Journal* 13.2 (1999): 27-45.
- Bosmajian, Haig A. "Dehumanizing People And Euphemizing War." *Exploring Language, Eighth Edition*. Ed. Gary Goshgarian. New York: Addison-Wesley educational Publishers, Inc., 1998. 215-221.
- English, Bella. "When Words Go To War." *Exploring Language, Eighth Edition*. Ed. Gary Goshgarian. New York: Addison-Wesley educational Publishers, Inc., 1998. 226
- Gray-Briggs, Abigail and Michael MacIver. "Bombs, Then Bandages: Preparing the War Fighter for the Sojourn to Peacekeeping." *Airpower Journal* 13.2 (1999): 15-26.
- Hurley, Patrick. *A Concise Introduction To Logic*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1997.
- Leo, John. "Journalese As A Second Tongue." *Exploring Language, Eighth Edition*. Ed. Gary Goshgarian. New York: Addison-Wesley educational Publishers, Inc., 1998. 99-101.
- Lutz, William. *The New Doublespeak: Why No One Knows What Anyone's Saying Anymore*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 1996.
- United States. Dept. of the Air Force. Headquarters US Air Force. *AF Handbook 37-137: The Tongue and Quill*. Washington: GPO, 1994.
- United States. Dept. of the Air Force. Headquarters US Air Force. *AF Instruction 35-206: Media Relations*. Washington: GPO, 1994.

United States. Dept. of the Air Force. Headquarters US Air Force. *AF Instruction 36-2803: The Air Force Awards and Decorations Program*. Washington: GPO, 1998.

United States. Dept. of the Air Force. Headquarters US Air Force. *AF Pamphlet 13-5: US Air Force Effective Writing Course*. Washington: GPO, 1980.

United States. Dept. of the Army. Headquarters US Army. *AR 25-50: Preparing and Managing Correspondence*. Washington: GPO, 1988.