

Language, Violence, and Nonviolence Research Group

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Introduction

For the purpose of this paper, violence is defined as any action, direct or indirect, that inhibits an individual from reaching his or her full potential. This definition stems from Johan Galtung's definition of violence, given in his article "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research."

...Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations [...] Violence is here defined as the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is. (Galtung 168)

The United States military communicates using rhetoric designed and developed over time for specific purposes, many of which are of a violent nature, therefore necessitating rhetoric to the same degree of violence. While so many forms of violence in the military are obviously apparent in the physical actions and demonstrations of force sanctioned, many more lie in the rhetoric of the military culture.

In the preface to his book *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, Michael Walzer explains what he believes is the unfortunate necessity of this rhetoric and the consequent attitude those who use it must maintain. "We would be better off if we did not need a vocabulary like that, but given we need it, we must be grateful that we have it" (Walzer xi). Communication of war strategies, combative actions, and individual moments of extreme courage not only allow for functionality during the conflict, but also ensure that these aspects of military history are eternalized years after cease-fire.

"Without this vocabulary, we could not have thought about the Vietnam war as we did, let alone have communicated our thoughts to other people," Walzer continues (Walzer xi). The question, then, relates to the way in which those who wish to communicate use this vocabulary and to whom the communication is addressed. How is military rhetoric manipulated in one way or another in an attempt to alter the level of severity of any violent connotations?

Using the same definition of violence mentioned previously, violence in military rhetoric emerges as two distinct, redundant forms depending on which of two different categories of vocabulary is chosen or, just as frequently, excluded. Through studying both historical and modern military vocabulary, these two different categories can be designated as euphemistic and perspicuous. Communicators frequently use euphemisms as replacements for what is arguably the harsher, perspicuous rhetoric to convey messages to those not directly affected by the physical violence of military culture.

For example, the warhead of a Titan II missile, an explosive with roughly 630 times the explosive power of the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima, was described by an Air Force colonel as a "very large potentially disruptive re-entry system" (Bruce 295). Edward Palm, in his review of Paul Fussell's book *Doing Battle: The Making of a Skeptic*, pointed out the military definition of bombing defenseless villages from the air, driving inhabitants into the countryside, and setting huts on fire with incendiary bullets as "pacification" (Palm 71). During the Vietnam war, President Johnson spoke of "our American boys" instead of "soldiers" to distract the public's attention from the negative impacts of war (Fuiorea 216).

The application of these two different rhetorical categories leads to the two different forms of violence against those to whom the military culture must be communicated.

The introduction of harsh, perspicuous language into non-military environments perpetuates violence at a level of society that would otherwise be shielded from it. On the other hand, the use of euphemisms to replace vocabulary that would paint more accurate depictions of military operations in an attempt to deceive the public demonstrates a completely different form of violence. This rhetorical strategy inhibits addressees from forming complete conceptualizations of the military by concealing vital information. In 1917, Senator Hiram

Johnson warned the public, “truth is always the first casualty of war” (Palm 73).

Which of these two forms of violence is the more severe: the truth or lack thereof? This paper aims not to answer this question but rather present points of view and opinions that demonstrate the perceived level of severity of each.

Building the Beloved Community

“Our language is full of militaristic words with benign intentions” (Morin and Mouliert 23). These benign intentions are often not reflected in the actual effect of these words in communicated discourse. The “Building the Beloved Community” Issue Committee published an article titled with the question, “Can language be violent?” The term “Beloved Community” was first coined in the early days of the 20th century by Josiah Royce, the founder of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, then popularized by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The Beloved Community represents a community comprised of individuals “committed to and trained in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence;” an “achievable goal” if pursued by the critical number of people necessary (Morin and Mouliert 23).

“Nonviolence,” in this context, encompasses not only a lack of physical force but also thought, word, and deed. The Building the Beloved Community Issue Committee stressed the importance of cleansing everyday language of the benignly intended militaristic words in order to take a small step in the direction of an existence void of violence.

For example, the committee encourages the use of “points” to replace “bullets” and “addresses” to refer to “fights” or “battles.” “Taking the lead” would be a preferable phrase to “spearheading” and “focus” instead of “target.” Instead of explaining that an individual is “struggling for,” “standing up for,” “standing against,” or “fighting for” a certain cause, explain that he or she “devotes his/her life to” this cause (Morin and Mouliert 23). These vocabulary substitutions contribute a small part in putting a stop to the perpetuation of violence in everyday communication.

These substitutions require persistent commitment to the cause of nonviolence due to the fact that people are unconsciously attracted to violent terms, especially in cases of metaphors, often used to make a salient point (Summy 573). Ralph Summy, in his peace on nonviolent speech in the “Peace Review” theorized reasons why people are unconsciously attracted to violent terms. He also examined and hypothesized how this attraction helps to perpetuate a culture of violence, which affects societal behavior.

One of these reasons is the desire to “express ourselves in the most dynamic and forceful manner possible.” This want to express force is underlined by the aspect of our subconscious concerned with power. “People at all levels of social and political interaction tend to cling to the outmoded view that it is not cooperation but superiority of physical force and how it is directed that constitute the decisive and rewarding factors in conflict” (Summy 573). Even those advocating nonviolence often recognize that it must occasionally be employed in the interest of a cause and, therefore, must be held in reserve somewhere in the subconscious.

Humans are believed to be naturally aggressive creatures, leading to the tendency to employ more violent vocabulary. “Beneath the veneer of civil and ordered human relations, Homo sapiens is an innately violent creature, and society is constantly on the threshold of chaos” (Summy 573). Violent language acts as a catalyst in this regard in that personal expression directs and reflects concrete phenomenon such as societal behavior.

Summy, like Building the Beloved Community Issue, offered substitutions to replace more violent terms in an attempt to lessen the everyday violence discretely incorporated into society through language. “Shooting holes in an argument” could instead be conveyed as “unraveling a ball of yarn.” A soccer “shoot-out” could be more appropriately referred to as a “boot-out.” “To kill two birds with one stone” may instead be “to stroke two birds with one hand” while a “double-edged sword” is a “two-sided coin.” Individuals should not aspire to “dress to kill” but rather “dress to thrill” (Summy 573).

Euphemistic Metaphors in Military Usage

The use of these metaphors, however, does more than extract a certain degree of violence from daily discourse. Applied specifically to military culture, euphemistic metaphors allow more vivid, relatable, understandable images to be conveyed to those who want to understand what they will never directly experience.

American literature contains an abundance of timeless pieces written during and as a result of various military conflicts woven into our history. Wartime leaves deep scars behind, but also produces some of the most emotionally provocative vocabulary.

This same use of metaphors both reestablishes the public's support of the government as well as a soldier's confidence in himself. The Khe Sanh garrison, an early 1968 garrison of 6,000 United States and South Vietnamese troops, found itself surrounded by an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 North Vietnamese troops. The operation to extract these soldiers was referred to as Operation Niagara, a metaphor intended to invoke an image of "cascading shells and bombs" against the enemy (Dochinoiu 71).

Similarly, the naming of the operations against Iraqi aggression was as strategic as the actual operations. "Desert Shield" conveys a defensive message, emphasizing that Iraqi forces were already deployed. The United States efforts were merely a force of deterrence against the aggression already displayed. "Desert Storm" uses the storm metaphor to shift the focus from deterrence to offensive operations. General H. Norman Schwarzkopf told American soldiers, "You must be the thunder and lightning of Desert Storm" (Dochinoiu 72).

These same metaphors effectively garner the support of the public for the government, which is vital for efficient government operations. In many situations, the harsh, perspicuous vocabulary would evoke unrest and even panic within the public and society as a whole.

Ty Soloman examined the rhetoric used by President George W. Bush during the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, looking specifically for metaphors and imagery possibly used to pacify a frightened public. The study included all presidential weekly radio addresses from September 11, 2001 until August 7, 2004, televised public statements made by the president on September 11, 2001, and the first three State of the Union addresses after September 11, 2001 (Soloman 1).

Bush's rhetoric in the years following the events of 9/11 employs metaphors and key words, most likely in an attempt to garner support from the nation as well as hopefully alleviate some of the fear that gripped the nation at this point in American history.

In addition to various religious references, Bush used a series of metaphors that invoked images of darkness, shadow, and evil. Bush described the anti-terrorism operations sanctioned as a result of 9/11 as a move to "eradicate the evil of terrorism" (Soloman 6). Bush's rhetoric dehumanizes terrorists by referring to the operations as an eradication of the evil of terrorism rather than the terrorists. This dehumanization of terrorists would draw the public's support for the operations. Not until years later, in 2003 when the immediate panic the attacks evoked in the nation had subsided, does Bush abandon this dehumanizing metaphor for the more blunt, aggressive rhetoric. He refers to the continued anti-terrorism efforts as "a struggle between terrorist killers and peaceful nations" and the terrorists as a "hidden network of killers" (Soloman 6).

The metaphors Bush used in the years following the events of 9/11 were crucial in ensuring the public remained supportive of the anti-terrorism efforts deployed during the aftermath. Rhetorical power, in this situation, was more than a form of communication but also "a way of constituting the people to whom it is addressed by furnishing them with the very equipment they need to assess its use" (Soloman 15).

Inherited Language of Concealment

We use words given to us by past generations. Walzer wrote on the nature of the language handed down from generation to generation:

"Our anger and indignation were shaped by the words available to express them, and the words were at the tips of our tongues even though we had never before explored their meanings and connections. When we talked about aggression and neutrality, the rights of prisoners of war and civilians, atrocities and war crimes, we were drawing upon the work of many generations of men and women, most of whom we had never heard of" (Walzer xi)

Although war is not an emotion, the language used to discuss the emotions evoked by war is rivaled arguably only by that used to speak of love; the two most intense emotions expressed verbally. This type of language is "rich with moral meaning" and developed over years of discourse and conflict (Walzer 3). When it comes to the function of these morally and emotionally charged words within the military culture, "harsh words

are the immediate sanctions of the war convention, sometimes accompanied or followed by military attacks...” (Walzer 44). While neither the words nor the actions carry the same level of absolutism separate from the other, combined they sanction military action.

The euphemisms used by those who act as the communicators between the military realm and the non-military realm aim to relate those who will never directly experience the physical violence to those on the frontlines. These euphemisms are carefully used to maintain public support for military operations as well as inform without enraging the non-military population of the nation. Metaphors, euphemisms, and specific rhetoric remove unnecessary violent language from realms not subject to the direct effects of physical violence.

Conversely, have the government’s efforts to maintain public support resulted in the concealment of vital information, inhibiting the public’s ability to fully understand the actions of the military?

Edward Palm, in his review of Paul Fussell’s *Doing Battle: The Making of a Skeptic* referenced one of Fussell’s earlier pieces from 1975: *Great War and Modern Memory*. Palm described the earlier piece as a “definitive account of the ways in which WWI bifurcated the modern psyche, establishing an absurd ‘no man’s land’ between personal and official accounts of the war” (Palm 72).

“At some point in our military history, cant became our mandatory mode of expression, particularly at the highest levels of command” (Palm 72). Palm defines cant as insincere, inflated, vague language aimed at putting a good face on not so good actions. The trend, according to Palm, can be traced back to early years of the 20th century when George Orwell, author of 1984 brushed upon the developing rhetorical pattern in his essay, “Politics and the English Language.” Politicians use language for much more than just communication, but rather concealment. “...Political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible...political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging, and sheer cloudy vagueness” (Palm 73).

Palm demonstrated this evolution of military language by comparing the modern politics of the military to the part, or lack thereof, politics played years previously.

“If Pickett had made his disastrous charge in today’s political climate...General Lee could never have assumed responsibility for the awful outcome with such simple eloquence as to insist that “It is all my fault.” He would have been expected to magnify individual acts of heroism until the public lost sight of the charge’s essential futility and the wholesale slaughter seemed redeemed and even worthwhile” (Palm 71)

Euphemisms are used for “everything belligerent, introduced into language skillfully, and deliberately so” (Galtung 2). Euphemisms use pleasing vocabulary and semantics to mask the unpleasant nature of whatever concept they replace. The Strategic Defense Initiative is an example of specifically chosen semantics to convey an inarguably positive message. Strategic thinking and functioning characterizes all efficiently operated militaries. Defense “connotes peace” and a restraint of provocative force maintained but initiative must still be taken (Galtung 2). The name of the Strategic Defense Initiative is so named using specific words designed to convey the supposedly nonviolent intentions of a military conglomerate.

The same way euphemisms shield the public from unnecessary violence, they can also conceal necessary violence; the violence the public must be exposed to in order to remain informed of the actual actions of the military and make informed decisions regarding what to support. “Words and phrases euphemistically used by American...mass media to refer to military operations not only sugar-coat harsh events, but also premeditatedly modify the addressee’s correct perception of reality, so that what actually happens is no longer reflected in language” (Fuiorea 212).

Violations of the Cooperative Principle

The Cooperative Principle elaborates on common assumptions shared by people in order to communicate and comprehend. These assumptions declare the maxims of cooperative communication to be relevance, saying no more and no less than is needed at the time, and not saying what is false. Military euphemisms can be interpreted in such a way that all three of these maxims are violated (Fuiorea 212).

Certain military euphemistic words and phrases violate the Cooperative Principle by presenting information in a way not easily understandable by others, most likely with the intent to mislead, thus violating the falsehood maxim. A “permissive environment” is one of unchallenging territory from the military point of

view. "Administrative detention" is imprisonment without charge or trial and a "generous offer" is a demand for surrender. These phrases conceal true connotations by using nonviolent words such as permissive, administrative, and generous (Fuiorea 213).

Other euphemisms contain too little information for the true message to ever be fully understood, possibly with the same intent to deceive. Official military rhetoric presented to the public very rarely contains vocabulary such as guilt, murder, assassination, torture, mistake, in an attempt to minimize undesirable awareness on the part of the public. In this sense, language becomes a propaganda tool used to hide a provocative reality (Fuiorea 213).

Another maxim of the Cooperative Principle states that what speakers say should be true and does not lack adequate evidence. Certain euphemisms purposely replace words that would reveal a harsh reality. For example, in April 2005, the US Military made the statement that, "If we don't take the initiative, others will take the initiative before us." In this statement, "taking the initiative" acts as a euphemism for our military being the first to launch offensive operations against the opposing force (Fuiorea 213).

Institutional Deception

The media plays a significant part in the deception maintained through military euphemisms. News broadcasts are careful to describe enemies as "soft targets," not humans. Bombs are dropped by aircrafts, not the human pilots within them. If the wrong building is destroyed by weaponry, it was faulty equipment (Fuiorea 214). The use of these phrases rather than the arguably more accurate ones deflects responsibility of some of the more horrendous acts of war and violence committed by the military.

In official press releases, the Pentagon stopped all use of the word "kill" or the phrase "number killed," and instead referred to these as "casualties," again deflecting responsibility by concealing any sense of choice on the part of those who committed the act.

In Harry Bruce's piece, "Language of the U.S. Military," he pointed out many more translations of common, nonmilitary rhetoric into "Pentagonese." The U.S. Armed Forces Journal jokingly enumerated several "Pentagonese" terms: surprise attack as "premature offense," death as "circadian deregulation," tank as "hostility platform," peace as "permanent pre-hostility," and battle as "violence processing" (Bruce 295).

According to Bruce's piece, the Quarterly Review of Doublespeak took the "joke" one step further by reporting that General Bernard Rogers, the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe made a statement that described civilian casualties as "collateral damage." This statement, however, was no joke, but an accurately quoted example of doublespeak (Bruce 295). This example supports Fuiorea's statement in her article on pragmatism in military language: "Military euphemisms are used to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable..." (Fuiorea 216).

While the majority of Bruce's piece humorously pokes fun at the euphemistic military language, employed in the Pentagon more than in most other military environments due to the high concentration of military presence, he also touches upon the more serious aspect of doublespeak. When military personnel speak the truth, it is undeniably disconcerting, made only more so by the fact that it does not occur often. "It's when military get mournful that they sound the most like creatures from another planet, or from a computer's icy womb" (Bruce 296).

That being said, Bruce's piece expresses an opinion he considers to be the consensus of a significant portion of the public population that, "I'd feel a lot better about the future of the real world if military officers had a commitment to talking like the real people everywhere, who pray they'll not end their lives as collateral damage" (Bruce 296).

There is another inhibiting aspect of these euphemisms which is not as apparent as the deception maintained in order to not evoke fear or anger. Some of these euphemisms have the effect of minimizing the efforts of service men and women, suppressing any emotions of admiration or even recognition that would result if these euphemisms did not dull the harshness of military actions.

"Only a few have understood, much less been sympathetic to, how the unrelenting political pressure to keep old illusions alive has victimized the military as well, ultimately demeaning those who serve and even denigrating their legitimate sacrifices," (Palm 74).

The violence committed against the public overshadows that done unto those men and women on the frontlines, whose sacrifices go unrecognized and hidden beneath appeasing euphemisms. Even further beyond that lies the violence committed against those memorialized in history as “collateral damage,” a “civilian casualty,” or “caught in the cross-fire.”

Those who fall victim to military violence become a number in a system of categorization based on volume of deaths. “How much killing is ‘systematic killing’? What number of murders makes a ‘massacre’? How many people have to be forced to leave before we can talk of ‘ethnic cleansing’?” (Walzer). These types of words and labels rarely make it to the public before being replaced with euphemisms. These euphemisms bury the harsh reality that is military combat and war, in an interest to maintain an appeased, ignorant public opinion.

Communication is indispensable in civilized societies regardless of the nature of the concepts being communicated: perspicuously violent or euphemistically nonviolent. However, the art of communication allows for such a high degree of manipulation, the true severity of the violence can be concealed from the public or, conversely, can be imposed upon individuals not in the realm of military culture.

“They are descriptive terms, and without them we would have no coherent way of talking about war. Here are soldiers moving away from the scene of battle, marching over the same ground they marched over yesterday, but fewer now, less eager, many without weapons, many wounded: we call this a retreat” (Walzer 14).

Violent language has the potential to subconsciously perpetuate violence through an innately aggressive species consumed by the concept that force equates to power. Benignly violent terms can be easily substituted with words of a less harsh nature to take a step in the direction of a purely nonviolent existence.

However, military euphemisms have developed to a point of concealing information vital for those not on the front lines to truly comprehend the actions of the military as well as the reasoning behind such actions. The politics of what the public should and should not know has led to a level of distrust among those depending on communicators to accurately depict wartime efforts.

The question remains as to whether or not there is an ideal pattern of rhetoric that could convey enough, but no more than the necessary information required to truly understand military culture, therefore respecting the maxims of the Cooperative Principle. This ideal rhetorical strategy would accurately inform the public of vital military movements without inciting unnecessary distress among the nation’s non-military entity. Incorporating this carefully conceptualized set of rhetoric into everyday use would allow for a better-informed public and a more widely supported military.

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