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Linguistic Practices in the Nigerian Army: An Analysis of Command Codes and Military Communication

Takim Ajom Okongor

Department of English and Linguistics,
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,
Federal University Dutse,
Jigawa State,
Nigeria
Email: takimajomokongor@ gmail.com
08137945071

I. G. Mustapha

Department of English and Linguistics,
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,
Federal University Dutse,
Jigawa State,
Nigeria
Email: igmustaphasays@gmail.com
08065951233

Abstract

This study investigates the linguistic practices within the Nigerian Army, with emphasis on the use of command codes and multilingual communication. While English is the official language of command, informal interactions often involve Nigerian Pidgin and indigenous languages. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through interviews and non-participant observation with serving personnel. Findings reveal that military language is shaped by both institutional hierarchy and Nigeria's multilingual setting. Features such as code-switching, euphemism, and compressed directives, which reflect the pragmatic and functional nature of military interaction, will be taken into consideration by the researchers. It concludes that language policy in military training should reflect Nigeria's linguistic reality to enhance operational efficiency.

Keywords: Command Language, Code-switching, Nigerian Pidgin, Military Communication, Pragmatics, Multilingualism

Introduction

Language within military establishment performs key roles such as issuing commands, maintaining discipline, and facilitating coordination. In a linguistically diverse country like Nigeria, language use in the Defense Forces reflects not only formality and authority but also adaptability and social bonding.

This study investigates how language is used in formal and informal military contexts, focusing on command language and code-switching within the Nigerian Army. It addresses the gap in linguistic research on Nigerian military communication and contributes to our understanding of how multilingualism operates in institutional settings.

Literature Review: Language of the Military

According to Asher and Simpson (1994), anyone who has served in the military of any nation can attest to the fact that military communication functions as a distinct language. The military, as an organised institution, operates with clearly defined goals. To ensure the successful execution of these goals, strict adherence to rules, procedures and regulations is emphasised.

As (Keyence 1999), observes, for an institution like the army to function effectively, there must be shared responsibility, unwavering loyalty, and clear communication among its members

The military language is distinct, possessing its own specific linguistic traits and features. As Murray(1986: 126) observes, such linguistic forms are not mere stylistic choices but are deliberate communicative tools essential for tactical operations, strategic planning, and in-group cohesion. Most military personnel speeches deal with issues of authority, dominance, etc. Another notable characteristic of the language is its dependence on signals as the primary means of transmitting messages. According to Kyenge (1999), a signal message must be an action or a product of an action demanding response or correspondence. The way in which a message flows within the military hierarchy is dictated by the tone of the message, which is formal. It must be clear and brief. It must also depend on who is sending and to whom. For example, if it is from a captain to a major then it must be polite and frank giving the most detailed information and inferring that the final decision is with the superior officer. According to Kyenge (1999), regardless of the direction within the military hierarchy, a signal message

typically has two main features: it is detailed and reflects an awareness of rank and authority; at the same time, it is concise and exact, often utilising abbreviations, coded language and symbols. In military communication, careful attention is given to the fact that these codes convey both semantic and pragmatic meanings, which may differ based on the situation and context. Internally, military language is marked by precision. A high level of caution is exercised, particularly in the use of first- and second person singular pronouns, to avoid assigning direct personal responsibility for actions taken in official capacities.

Military language is often distinct from civilian communication, marked by brevity, directness, and coded expressions (Kirkpatrick, 1991; Enkvist, 1986). In Nigeria, the military draws on multiple languages—primarily English for official command and Nigerian Pidgin or indigenous languages for informal interaction.

Studies by Bamgbose (1991) and Igboanusi (2006) have shown how multilingualism shapes institutional communication. Sociolinguists such as Gumperz (1982) and Myers-Scotton (1993) note that code-switching reflects social roles, group identity, and communicative efficiency.

However, few studies have examined how these phenomena manifest in the Nigerian Army. Military status etiquette, according to Brown (1963:74), illustrates the interrelatedness of norms. According to O'Brien et al (1957:211),

When individuals live in close communications, they often establish common patterns of behaviour. They tend to adopt a shared language, similar styles of dress, and consistent beliefs and attitudes on various issues. These shared practices and traditions function as social guidelines, directing how members of the group are expected to behave in different contexts. Frequently such standards and prescriptions are social norms.

He went further to say that some norms are established by religious authority or legislative decrees. Others may be pronounced by powerful persons backed by force and violence if necessary. We find norms wherever we find an organised society, primitive or complicated. These norms serve as focal points in the experiences of the individual and guide for his actions.

In every society, social norms play a role in shaping and guiding people's daily routines. The military like any situation has its rules and norms. The soldiers' concepts, purpose and actions are defined. This view is supported by Arnold (1957:320), cited in O'Brien et al., (1957), who opines that,

In any social organisation, there is a theoretical structure consisting of formal rules and regulations designed to control the activities of the members and manifest structure consisting of the observable behaviour of members. These are verbal precepts that indicate how things are supposed to be done, while the latter consist of overt activities that indicate how things actually are done.

Deviation from institutional norm is severally punished especially in the military. This is because a norm embodies values most highly cherished by the members of that organisation.

To the sociologists, the military implies acceptance of organised violence as a legitimate means for attaining social objectives. In most countries of the world, the military structures are permanent organisations maintained even in peacetime, for the eventuality of armed conflict. These establishments are managed by military men. That is, the military professionals, those who pursue occupational career of service in the armed forces. For one to qualify as professional soldier, he must acquire the expertise necessary to manage the military structures.

According to Broom and Seiznick (1963:75), “Career commitment and expertise constitute qualities of military pursuits which distinguish the professional soldier from others who are not professional in the art of war”. Dornbusch in O’Brien (1957:219), states: “Effective fulfilment of the role of an officer entails the acquisition of certain skills and technical information and perhaps even more important the development of a proper philosophy toward government, military force and defence and public service”. Military plans need to be adaptable to accommodate unexpected situation, seize any available opportunities, or adjust to change by transitioning effectively between strategies. Achieving this requires solid training, efficient organisation, clear communication, and the availability of a service force. It also requires a high level of physical mobility to allow for quick and efficient repositioning and regrouping. Most importantly, it calls for mental flexibility and swift decision-making from commanders at every level. It also calls for physical mobility of a high order so that new dispositions and grouping can be adopted rapidly and economically. Above all, it demands flexibility of mind and rapidity of decision on the part of the commandant right down to the lowest level.

Military operations require coordination among all branches and units within the army, collaboration between combat forces, the military and civilian authorities and in allied forces between allies. It relies on a strong sense of teamwork and involves harmonising all efforts to ensure effective execution to achieve greatest possible collective effort. Successful cooperation is only possible when there is sincere goodwill and a shared commitment to collaboration at every level. In joint operation, this requires setting aside narrow service loyalties that prioritise uniform distinctions or demand a strictly single- service command structure below the task force commander. Under certain circumstances and for a specific task, a service personnel must be willing to operate under the command of another, even at relatively low

levels of authority. For the military to carry out their functions effectively, there has to be an organised communication network for the dissemination of information and effective execution of policies, hence the importance of the military language.

3. Theoretical Framework

The two theoretical frameworks chosen for the analysis of data in this study are, Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), and sociolinguistic Theory. Speech Act Theory explains how utterances including commands perform actions. Austin (1962), Speech Act Theory is premised on the belief that “there is more to language than the meaning of its words and phrases”. In the act of producing a sentence, a speaker simultaneously performs three separate types of speech acts. This is consistent with the framework originally proposed by Austin and later developed by Searle, which are: locutionary act, the act of producing an utterance with a specific linguistic form. Locutionary act is summed up as the act of speaking itself. That is, the production of a meaningful utterance while illocutionary act is the act of uttering a sentence with a certain intention (praise, criticism, etcetera), it is the underlying message in the locutionary act. The perlocutionary act is therefore the effect of both the locutionary acts and illocutional acts. Thus, we can say that perlocutionary act is the action that comes as a result of a speaker having spoken. It is the act expressing a sentence with a specific communicative function or pragmatic intent, for example, to frighten, to command or get one to do something.

Sociolinguistic Theory, particularly the concept of code-switching **and** language choice as advanced by Gumperz (1982) and Myers-Scotton (1993), explains how speakers adapt to cross-linguistic contexts to reinforce identity, hierarchy, or precision. The first is Gumperz’s (1982) theory of interactional sociolinguistics, which emphasises how speakers use language choices to communicate social meaning within specific contexts. In a multilingual institution like the Nigerian military, switching from

English, Nigerian pidgin, and indigenous languages is more than a linguistic practice. It serves as interactional technique for expressing control, managing interpersonal relationships, or facilitating clarity. Code-switching in this context acts as a communicative device, helping listeners interpret not only what is said, but how it should be understood based on the social setting. The second theoretical framework examines code-switching from the perspective of identity, is provided by Myers-Scotton's (1993), Markedness Model. This theory, offers insight into the reasons behind language choice. This model, suggests that speakers select a language based on whether they want to adjust with societal conventions or constraint or redefine those values. For example, English often represents the formal or official code in military discourse, especially during training, orders, and ceremonial events. However, personnel may switch to pidgin English or indigenous languages during informal interactions or field operations to reinforce solidarity, signal ethnic identity, or ensure clarity. These switches are deliberate and meaningful, reflecting the speaker's awareness of their social environment and desired outcomes. The frameworks provide an in-depth knowledge of code-switching in the military. Gumperz focuses on the interactional functions of language, showing how switching helps structure conversation and convey implicit meanings. Myers-Scotton, in a different approach, explains the underlying reasons and sociolinguistic outcomes of those preferences. In the Nigerian military- which personnel come from different language repertoires, code switching becomes a crucial linguistic resource that reflects not just linguistic choice, but also identity, hierarchy of authority, and contextual suitability. It reflects the tactical use of language to adapt identity, convey urgency, and reinforce group solidarity in mission- critical settings. Code-switching in the Nigerian military is not a result of language inadequacy, but rather a strategic means of adapting to a diverse linguistic environment.

Methodology

Sources of Data

In conducting this study, information was gathered from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data were obtained through oral interview with selected cadre of military men and officers of various ranks within the Infantry Division of the Nigerian Army. Secondary sources consisted of both published and unpublished materials, including relevant textbooks.

Method of Data Collection

Multiple techniques were utilised to collect data for this research. These included oral interviews and non-participant observation method.

Oral Interview

Oral interviews were employed as one of the techniques for gathering data from the respondents. These interviews were guided by a structured set of questions designed to facilitate data analysis. The interviews were conducted in an informal and relaxed setting, which encouraged the respondents to provide meaningful, reliable, and valid information regarding military registers. Such depth of response might have been difficult to obtain in a more formal environment.

Non participant observation

This is one of the most commonly used descriptive linguistic methods in gathering data in field linguistic research. The researcher employed this technique because it is very important in obtaining firsthand information.

A qualitative case study design was employed. Twenty Nigerian Army personnel from different ranks were interviewed. The breakdown is as follows: five senior ranking officers, five from intermediate ranks and ten from the non-commissioned ranks. Data

were transcribed and coded using thematic analysis, with particular attention to command structure, informal language use, and power dynamics.

Discussion and Findings

Command Language

Command expressions such as “Attention” “At ease,” “Left face/Right face”, “*Fall in!*”, “*Advance!*”, and “*Present arms*”, “*Order arms, Halt!*” are brief and directive. These utterances function as illocutionary acts, where meaning lies in the action performed, not just the words spoken.

Multilingual Interaction and Code-Switching

English remains supreme in formal situations, but Pidgin and indigenous languages are commonly used in barracks and during informal situations such as relaxation time.

For example, “Fall in sharp-sharp! Makeuna no dull!” blends English and Pidgin, increasing urgency and familiarity. Another example, Pidgin+Igbo, “If you no tighten am well, o gaebelata” (If you don’t tie it well, it will loosen).

Euphemism and Tactical Terms

“Collateral damage”, “friendly fire” “kinetic action”, “Boots on the Ground”, Enhanced Interrogation” “Extraction”, Force projection”, “*neutralise*”, “*handle the situation*”, or “*clear the zone*” are terms that reflect institutionalised euphemisms that soften the harshness of military action and aid psychological distancing. They use these terms to ease tension.

Language and Military Hierarchy

Those in senior military positions are more inclined to strict to official English usage, while junior personnel code-switch frequently. This pattern reflects both institutional discipline and sociolinguistic adaptation.

In the course of analysis, the researcher discovered that the features of military language are, comparatively, quite distinct from those of other professional varieties. This distinction arises from the unique nature of military terminologies, which are rarely shared with registers. These registers are specifically designed to perform particular communicative functions.

Military language is characterised by a distinctive style, particularly in its use of abbreviations and acronyms that convey specialised or technical meaning. Military language also involves a distinctive method of combining words to form new terms with specific meanings. For example, expressions like *scar face* or *papa-alpha-yankee* carry meanings that may be unclear to those unfamiliar with the context.

Below is a reflection of the categories of interviewees tabulated in table showing their cadre, number and percentage respectively and the result of the oral interview.

Does style affect the language used in the military?

Responses	Senior	Intermediate cadre	Junior Cadre	Total	Percentage
Yes	5	5	10	20	100
No	-	-	-	-	-
Undecided	-	-	-	-	-

From the table, we can see that all the respondents agreed that style affects the language used in the military profession. This is because the language is codified and peculiar to the profession alone. That is the language has a form that is different from other varieties outside the military profession. The form cannot be understood unless by formal learning or by individuals who belong to the profession. The respondents also said that the choice of words that are used in the military language is different from the choice of words used in other occupational varieties.

What are the concrete characteristics that differentiate the language of the military from other varieties of English Language?

Responses	Senior Cadre	Intermediate Cadre	Junior Cadre	Total
Abbreviation	5	5	10	20
Acronyms	5	5	10	20
Style	5	5	10	20

All of the respondents revealed that abbreviations, acronyms, style of writing and speaking are all features that differentiate military language from other varieties of English Language. The respondents also said that the language of the military is formally learnt and this is why it is difficult for a layman to understand it. Some respondents added that abbreviations and acronyms are used to save time in cases of emergency and also for confidential purposes.

Are there specific lexical items used in the military language?

Responses	Senior Cadre	Intermediate Cadre	Junior Cadre	Total	Percentage
Yes	5	5	10	20	100
No	-	-	-	-	-
Undecided	-	-	-	-	-

All the respondents agreed that there are specific lexical items in the military language because they have their own form of combination and coinage, which are limited only to the military.

Are these lexical items easy to understand by a layman and do they have a general meaning?

Responses	Senior	Intermediate	Junior	Total	Percentage
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	Cadre	Cadre	Cadre		
Yes	-	-	-	-	-
No	5	5	10	20	100
Undecided	-	-	-	-	-

The respondents all said that these lexical items are not easily understood by a layman because the language is codified. Some of the words are formed from combining other words together. As for having a general meaning, they do not. They all have various meanings, which is only understandable to one who has knowledge of the military language.

Is there any concrete relationship between military lexicons and other occupational lexicons?

Responses	Senior Cadre	Intermediate Cadre	Junior cadre	Total	Percentage
Yes	8	4	2	14	70
No	-	-	2	2	10
Undecided	-	2	2	4	20

From the table above, 75% out of 100% believe that the relationship between the lexicons depends on the term or word used at a particular time. Sometimes a particular word or lexicon can be shared between the language of the military and other occupational languages, but the meaning would be different. It is because of this situation that we say they are related.

Are there specific differences between the way words are formed in the military profession and other occupational fields?’

Responses	Senior Cadre	Intermediate Cadre	Junior Cadre	Total	Percentage
Yes	8	4	2	14	70

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No	-	-	2	2	10
Undecided	-	2	2	4	20

From the table above 70% out of 100% respondents said that there are quite some differences between the way words are formed in the military language and other fields or professions. This is so because most lexical items in the military language are slangs or coined from the general English language.

Conclusion

Language use in the Nigerian Army combines formal codes with informal multilingual practices. While command codes promote discipline and structure, code-switching and Pidgin use help foster solidarity and comprehension among troops. The study recommends that military communication training should integrate pragmatic awareness of Nigeria's linguistic diversity. Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that military language is both unique and essential within the armed forces. Its technical nature is evidence in the frequent use of abbreviations, codes and numerical references that are often incomprehensible to those outside the military context. There are certain words used in the military, which are peculiar only to the military profession. This helps to make operations easier and more effective. These various peculiarities account for the uniqueness of the military profession.

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