

AVIATION ENGLISH IN MILITARY INTERCULTURAL CONTEXT

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Abstract: *The geopolitical context of the early decades of the 21st century, at the global level, on the one hand, and at the European level, on the other, has called for increased efforts by EU countries to develop a coherent strategy for their own state security through modernization of military capabilities, their alignment with the capabilities of their strategic allies, and the establishment of joint actions and plans, together with allies, in order to counter threats or hostile actions by the Russian Federation, or by terrorist groups. The participation of pilots in multinational exercises or training sessions in NATO's advanced training schools, outside the borders of national territories, and, last but not least, the English language proficiency requirements for aviation operations have led to increased attention paid to learning English and training of pilots in specialized aviation terminology in English. Although the English language proficiency requirements are generally met by the military pilots all over the world, their native tongue (L1), as the representative of the culture to which the pilots belong, may affect the successful cooperation between professionals of various cultural backgrounds. The aim of this paper is to illustrate some of the aspects that national cultures may reveal through the use of the English language (L2) in aeronautical activities, and to highlight the relevance of cultural awareness in the accomplishment of military multinational missions.*

Keywords: *military cultural awareness, intercultural competence, acoustic salience, cultural sensitivity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Multinational military operations rely on the joint effort of allies to gain supremacy in the operational environment. Proficiency in Aviation English enhances interoperability between air forces and facilitates flawless integration and joint operations. It allows the exchange of information, sharing of intelligence and the ability to respond to unforeseen events promptly. Clear and accurate communication is crucial for preserving safety in aviation. Pilots must be able to understand and convey critical information related to flight operations, weather conditions, and navigation and emergency procedures. In addition to language proficiency, awareness of cultural nuances, customs and communication styles may help military personnel to develop empathy, build trust and promote effective cooperation with counterparts from other countries. This cultural understanding contributes to successful collaboration and mission accomplishment.

For multinational military operations, at large, knowledge of adversaries' cultural behaviors in the increasingly unpredictable theater of operations may bring about triumph or make the difference between partial loss and disaster. Equally

important, knowledge and understanding of cultural diversity of own allies may foster efficacy in the military conduct of operations.

For air missions, nevertheless, Aviation English, perceived as the core element in communication, should be univocally utilized by friendly forces, whereas cultural manifestations, in terms of language production, unless they are made known to various participants in the mission, may impede clear understanding of tasks and lead to failure.

2. AVIATION ENGLISH – A *LINGUA FRANCA*?

2.1 Clarification of concepts. English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is used as a common language by speakers of different mother tongues (Jenkins, 2006), yet, Aviation English is not a mixture of languages to be utilized by pilots and air traffic controllers in their air communications, neither does it employ only non-native speakers. The standardized *phraseology*, so often associated with the language of pilots and air traffic controllers, display discrete syntactic, morphologic and phonetic traits of which all participants in aeronautical activities must be cognizant, whereas no synonymy, semantic variations or phonetic

deviations are accepted. Native speakers are likewise engaged in this endeavor and must adhere to precisely similar standards, which contradicts the principles of a *lingua franca*.

Aviation English, therefore, is regarded as English for Specific Purposes (Hyland, 2002) and the use of phraseology applies to routine flight activities, in which both native and non-native speakers of English involve. Non-routine situations require that aeronautical personnel make use of *plain* English, but under the same constraints of coherence, clarity and brevity.

Military Aviation English, then again, doubles the purpose for which it was tailored, as it aims to serve aviation in the specific environment of the military. The difference from general aviation English consists mainly of specialized vocabulary related to military aircraft, air operations and aerodrome management and particular manners of sending messages via radio stations.

2.2 Aviation English in the military. Apart from the uniqueness of environment that requires this particular form of communication in English, military aviation English adhere to all of Grice's maxims (1975) that were originally formulated for general language use. By adhering to these maxims, military aviation communication minimizes misunderstandings, facilitates efficient coordination and promotes flight safety. Thus, the maxim of *quantity* ensures that communication is concise, yet sufficiently informative, as pilots and air traffic controllers should provide the necessary information without overloading the channel with excessive details or being insufficient in conveying critical information; maxim of *quality* implies that the information exchanged between pilots and air traffic controllers is truthful and based on reliable source and that misinformation or incomplete information can lead to misunderstanding and potentially dangerous situations; maxim of *relevance* entails that military aviation communication should focus on the immediate tasks, objectives and relevant information pertaining to the flight or mission at hand and conversation should avoid unnecessary digressions and remain focused on the subject matter; maxim of *manner* brings about clarity, brevity, and organization in military aviation communication, where information needs to be conveyed promptly and accurately – using standardized phraseology, clear instructions and concise messages helps ensure effective communication between pilots, air traffic controllers and other categories of personnel involved. However, it is important to note that

military aviation communication also has its own specific protocols, procedures and jargon which may differ from general conversational norms due to the unique operational requirements and safety considerations of military aviation.

Whilst the cooperative principles are sought for by military communication in English, regulatory documents with regard to language proficiency requirements for the specific field of aeronautics, issued under the auspices of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), mainly address the civil aviation. Based on the *Personnel Licensing* (ICAO, Annex 1, 2006) stipulations, pilots and air traffic controllers need to reach the minimum Level 4, in order to obtain their licenses: “The Operational Level 4 (Level 4) is the minimum required proficiency level for radio telephony communications. Levels 1 through 3 describe Pre-elementary, Elementary and Preoperational levels of language proficiency, respectively, all of which describe a level of proficiency below the ICAO language proficiency requirement. Level 5 and 6 describe Extended and Expert levels, at levels of proficiency more advanced than the minimum required standard. As a whole, the scale will serve as benchmarks for training and testing, and in assisting candidates to attain the ICAO Operational Level 4” (Attachment A. ICAO Language Proficiency Rating Scale). No mentioning of the particular instance of military pilots and air traffic controllers is made; therefore we may only deduce that this professional category must meet similar requirements with their civilian peers.

Furthermore, assuming that military pilots and air traffic controllers have solid knowledge of a foreign language, it is still not enough if the assessment of their English language proficiency in specific professional contexts is not tested uniformly, by means of the same assessment tool, for all Member States of Military Alliances.

2.3 Aviation English in military intercultural context. The richness and complexity of culture make it a subject of ongoing exploration and debate, at the same time as different disciplines and scholars may approach the concept of culture from various angles, leading to nuanced interpretations and understandings. Benveniste (1975/1971) asserted that there is always a natural bond between culture and language, as long as culture inevitably implies the existence of humans and their innermost expression is by means of language.

As for military environments, we dare say there is a distinct culture surrounding military

aviation. This field has a rich history and has developed its own unique traditions, values and practices over time. The key cultural aspects of military aviation encompass pride and professionalism, camaraderie and teamwork, hierarchy and discipline, training and continuous learning, adherence to regulations and safety measures, professionalism in appearance and conduct, traditions and rituals etc., all of which relate to the specialized language that is employed in aeronautical activities. Once military alliance have been established, it is then but natural for military aviators to share common values and be aware of friendly forces' cultures and use of English language distinctiveness, for the common goal of accomplishing joint military missions.

Starting from Varner and Beamer's (2005:40) assertion that language cannot be separated from culture "because language is not a matter of neutral codes and grammatical rules. Each time we send messages, we also make cultural choices", the case of aviation English becomes even more particular, in the sense that this type of communication occurs over the radio station, lacking any visual prompts, or facial expressions or body language, yet adding some background noise to conversations, or interruptions cause by technical errors. Aviation English in the military adds extra harshness to its interlocutors as they must be knowledgeable of all communication specificities related to maneuvers, friend or foe aircraft characteristics and share exactly the same brevity codes with allies. In other terms, linguistic competence alone does not suffice, nor does it fill out the lack of understanding others' cultural traits manifested through language. Thus, pilots and air traffic controllers need to be culturally aware of their peers and their intercultural competence should manifest in tolerance of the others, openness towards cultural differences in the manner of speaking or exchanging messages, knowledge of such occurrences with allies belonging to various culture zones and most of all desire to cooperate with one another for the common goal of being successful in their missions.

Unfortunately, some of the regulatory documents issued by ICAO in reference to linguistic competence of the aeronautical personnel, such as ICAO Doc 9432 (2007) or ICAO Doc 9835 (2010), only stress the importance of language awareness related to language production by both native and non-native speakers of English, but it fails to make participants in air missions aware of the real understanding of language or the reasons due to which miscommunication occurs.

Cultural awareness is occasionally mentioned in these documents, yet again, it is compliant with requirements rather than with assistance provided to pilots and air traffic controllers. Such realities make it harder for afore-mentioned professionals to cope with deviations from standardized phraseology caused by cultural bonds, especially when these deviations manifest in speeches delivered via the microphone.

3. ACOUSTIC SALIENCE AND CULTURAL BONDS

3.1 Radio transmissions. In the context of military aviation, where accurate and efficient communication is critical for safety and mission success, acoustic salience plays a crucial role ensuring that messages are effectively transmitted and understood. Nevertheless, may pilots and air traffic controllers be proficient in their standardized phraseology production, they equally need to be proficient in messages reception, which is understanding messages produced by others, alongside with cultural elements that join them.

Clear pronunciation helps prevent confusion and misunderstandings, particularly when communicating critical information such as flight instructions, positions or emergency procedures, therefore pilots and air traffic controllers strive to pronounce words accurately and distinctly to maximize acoustic salience. Articulation and intonation are also important because by emphasizing key words or phrases through appropriate stress and intonation patterns, speakers can convey important information and convey the intended meaning more clearly. This helps ensure that the essential elements of a message are easily discernible amid other background noises or radio transmissions. Standardized phrases and procedures are designed to be concise and easily understood and by their use pilots and air traffic controllers can transmit information efficiently and minimize the potential for miscommunication. And last, but not least, there must be radio discipline whenever communication is involved. It involves adhering to specific protocols and procedures, avoiding unnecessary prolonged transmissions, waiting for acknowledgement before transmitting additional information and using a clear and concise speaking style. By practicing good radio discipline, acoustic salience is enhanced and effective communication is facilitated.

In military international contexts, by focusing on clear pronunciation, effective articulation, standardized phraseology and radio discipline,

military aviation personnel can enhance the clarity and understandability of their communications, leading to safer and more efficient operations.

3.2 Cultural bonds in radio communication.

Despite their demonstrating solid knowledge of radio phraseology in English, aviation personnel still risk causing misunderstandings due to communication breakdowns. As Hofstede (1991:10) clearly states, professionals in various domains of expertise belong to certain social groups or cultures “carrying several layers of mental programming within themselves, corresponding to different levels of culture”. Although within a military alliance, partners get to know one another during multinational cooperation and benefit from one another’s culturally-shared experience, in the particular case of military aviation communication, knowledge of others’ cultural bonds contributes to avoiding air disasters by what they say, how they say it, the responses they expect, and how they react to them.

Cultural misunderstandings of aviation English can occur when there is a lack of cultural awareness or sensitivity to the cultural context in which the language is being used. As different cultures exhibit directness or indirectness in communication, a cultural misunderstanding may occur provided that a speaker from a direct culture uses straightforward and concise language in aviation English, which may be perceived as abrupt or impolite by one from an indirect culture. Similarly, variations in power distance, or the acceptance of unequal power distribution can result in miscommunication if, for example, a pilot from a high power distance culture uses exaggerated courteous language when speaking to an air traffic controller from a low power distance culture, who may interpret it as lack of confidence or assertiveness. Courtesy, ultimately, although a nice trait of cultural behavior, may affect communication by overloading messages unnecessarily and consuming precious time that may be allotted to other participants in air traffic.

Cultural differences in the perception of time can affect aviation English communication. Some cultures emphasize punctuality and adherence to schedules, while others have a more flexible approach. Misunderstandings can arise if one party expects strict adherence to a schedule, while the other party is more relaxed about time constraints, leading to delays or conflicts in aviation operations.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In order to mitigate cultural misunderstandings in aviation English, it is essential for military pilots and air traffic controllers to foster intercultural understanding and develop cultural competence. Training programs, cultural sensitivity workshops, and ongoing communication efforts can help aviation personnel become more aware of cultural differences and adapt their communication style accordingly. Actively seeking clarification and practicing active listening can also help resolve any misunderstandings that may arise due to cultural differences in aviation English communication.

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