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Command as discourse: a linguo-pragmatic study of military communication

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Annotation: *In modern military settings, communication serves not only as a tool for information exchange but also as a strategic resource for control, coordination, and authority assertion. Within this context, commands emerge as central discursive instruments, reflecting institutional hierarchy, operational urgency, and discipline. While traditionally examined through syntactic or semantic lenses, military commands warrant a broader analysis that considers their pragmatic functions and discursive realization.*

This article explores commands not merely as isolated speech acts but as discursive constructs embedded in military interaction. Drawing on linguistic and pragmatic theories, we analyze how commands function in military discourse, how they are linguistically structured, and what communicative strategies they employ to ensure clarity, compliance, and operational effectiveness.

By addressing the intersection of language, power, and institutional norms, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of command communication as a distinctive discourse type shaped by specific social, functional, and pragmatic constraints.

Keywords: *military discourse, command speech acts, pragmatics, discourse analysis, institutional communication, authority, directive language.*

Команда как дискурс: лингво-прагматическое исследование военной коммуникации

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Аннотация: *В современных военных условиях коммуникация служит не только средством обмена информацией, но и стратегическим ресурсом для осуществления контроля, координации и утверждения авторитета. В этом контексте команды выступают в качестве центральных дискурсивных инструментов, отражающих институциональную иерархию, оперативную срочность и дисциплину. Несмотря на то что традиционно они рассматривались с синтаксической или семантической точки зрения, военные команды заслуживают более широкого анализа с учётом их прагматических функций и дискурсивной реализации.*

Данная статья рассматривает команды не как изолированные речевые акты, а как дискурсивные конструкции, встроенные в военное взаимодействие. Основываясь на лингвистических и прагматических теориях, мы анализируем, как функционируют команды в военном дискурсе, как они структурированы с лингвистической точки зрения и какие коммуникативные стратегии используются для обеспечения ясности, подчинения и эффективности операций.

Рассматривая взаимосвязь между языком, властью и институциональными нормами, исследование вносит вклад в более глубокое понимание командной коммуникации как особого типа дискурса, формируемого социальными, функциональными и прагматическими ограничениями.

Ключевые слова: *военный дискурс, директивные речевые акты, прагматика, дискурсивный анализ, институциональная коммуникация, авторитет, директивный язык.*

Harbiy buyruq diskurs sifatida: harbiy muloqotning lingvo-pragmatik tadqiqi

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Annotatsiya: Zamonaviy harbiy sharoitlarda muloqot nafaqat axborot almashish vositasi, balki nazorat qilish, muvofiqlashtirish va hokimiyatni boshqarish uchun strategik manba sifatida ham xizmat qiladi. Shu nuqtai nazardan, buyruqlar institutsional iyerarxiya, tezkorlik va intizomni aks ettiruvchi markaziy diskursiv vositalar sifatida paydo bo'ladi. Harbiy buyruqlar an'anaviy ravishda sintaktik yoki semantik birliklar orqali ko'rib chiqilsa-da, ularning pragmatik funksiyalari va diskursiv amalga oshirilishini tahlil qilish dolzarb hisoblanadi.

Ushbu maqola buyruqlarni nafaqat alohida nutqiy harakatlar sifatida, balki o'zaro harbiy ta'sirga kiritilgan diskursiv tuzilmalar sifatida o'rganadi. Ushbu maqolada lingvistik va pragmatik nazariyalarga tayanib, buyruqlarning harbiy nutqda qo'llanilishi, lingvistik jihatdan tuzilishi, aniqlik, muvofiqlik va operatsion samaradorlikni ta'minlash uchun kommunikativ strategiyalardan foydalanilishi tahlil qilinadi.

Til, kuch va institutsional me'yorlarning ta'sirini ko'rib chiqish orqali ushbu tadqiqot o'ziga xos ijtimoiy, funksional va pragmatik cheklovlar bilan shakllangan alohida nutq turi sifatida buyruqlarni tushunishga imkon beradi.

Kalit so'zlar: harbiy nutq, buyruq nutqi aktlari, pragmatika, nutq tahlili, institutsional aloqa, hokimiyat, direktiv til.

Introduction

This study is grounded in a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that brings together insights from discourse analysis, speech act theory, and pragmatics, particularly within the domain of institutional communication. It draws on the foundational work of J.L. Austin and John Searle, who conceptualized commands as illocutionary acts, and integrates Michel Foucault's notion of discourse as a medium of power and control.

In military settings, discourse operates within a highly structured communicative environment, governed by strict hierarchies and procedural norms. This makes military commands not only linguistically distinct but also socio-pragmatically significant. From a linguo-pragmatic perspective, specific linguistic markers characterize command discourse – imperatives, modal verbs, and elliptical constructions – that serve to enact authority, establish roles, and prompt immediate compliance.

The study also employs the concept of discourse genre, treating military commands as a unique genre defined by institutional purpose, communicative intent, and formal constraints. The military command thus becomes a lens through which broader questions about language, authority, and pragmatics in institutional settings can be explored.

Literature review

The study of military discourse has increasingly attracted the attention of linguists seeking to understand how institutional power is exercised and maintained through language. Although military language has long been recognized for its precision, formality, and directness, its systematic study within the framework of discourse analysis is a relatively recent development. Scholars such as Chilton (Chilton, 2014), Fairclough (Fairclough, 2023) and van Dijk (van Dijk, 2007) have emphasized the importance of discourse in constructing institutional realities, including those within military settings. In this context, military discourse is seen not only as a vehicle for information

transmission but also as a performative act that reflects and reinforces institutional hierarchies and power dynamics.

The core linguistic feature of military discourse – the command – has its theoretical roots in *speech act theory*. Austin introduced the concept of *performative utterances*, where saying something is doing something, laying the foundation for understanding how commands function beyond mere propositions (Austin, 1962). John Searle later expanded this framework with his taxonomy of illocutionary acts, identifying *directives* as a category of speech acts intended to get the hearer to do something (Searle, 1975). Commands, as a subtype of directives, are thus understood as linguistic realizations of authority and obligation.

However, the application of speech act theory to military contexts reveals limitations. In military discourse, commands are not always issued in direct imperative forms. As shown in works by Coulthard and Johnson (Coulthard M., Johnson A., 2020) and Trosborg (Trosborg, 2017), indirect strategies, modalized expressions, and contextual cues often play significant roles in the realization and interpretation of commands. The pragmatics of command realization becomes even more complex when considering cross-linguistic and cross-cultural military communications, where politeness strategies, institutional conventions, and operational urgency intersect.

Sociolinguistic studies further deepen this understanding by examining how roles, ranks, and situational dynamics influence command forms. Holmes and Stubbe (Holmes J., Stubbe M., 2023) observe that institutional talk is shaped by both power relations and communicative goals, suggesting that in military discourse, the expression of commands is inherently tied to the speaker's institutional role. Research by Saville-Troike (Saville-Troike, 2019) supports the view that command structures are not just linguistic choices but are also culturally and socially conditioned.

In recent years, discourse analysts such as Cornelissen and Clarke (Cornelissen J.P., Clarke J., 2022) have explored military language from a critical discourse perspective, highlighting the ideological underpinnings of command language and the rhetorical strategies used to legitimize authority. Yet, there remains a noticeable gap in the literature regarding the systematic analysis of command realization in authentic military contexts – especially across different languages and operational settings.

This literature review demonstrates that while foundational theories provide essential tools for analyzing military command language, a specialized framework is required to capture the complexity of its realization in institutional discourse. The present study, therefore, seeks to bridge this gap by offering an integrated discourse-pragmatic analysis of commands within military communication.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative discourse-analytic approach, drawing data from authentic military texts, including field manuals, training dialogues, and real-time operational communications. The corpus comprises both written and spoken command examples from English-language military sources, with a focus on how commands are structured, interpreted, and pragmatically realized in operational contexts.

The study involves: textual analysis of commands for identifying structural patterns (*imperative forms, modal usage, verb collocations*); pragmatic analysis focusing on illocutionary force, contextual appropriateness, and perlocutionary effects; sociolinguistic interpretation to consider the role of institutional norms, hierarchical relationships, and cultural context in shaping command language. Analytical categories are derived from a hybrid model that combines speech act taxonomy (*following Searle's classification*) with discourse functions relevant to military operations – such as issuing orders, giving instructions, coordinating action, and ensuring compliance. This multi-layered methodology allows for a rich understanding of command language as both a grammatical structure and a socially situated discursive practice.

Analysis and discussion

The findings of this study reveal several critical insights into the realization and function of commands in military discourse, shedding light on the intricate relationship between language, authority, and coordination in operational settings. The analysis is structured across three primary dimensions: syntactic realization, pragmatic function, and sociolinguistic context.

1. Syntactic realization of commands. Commands in military discourse are primarily realized through direct imperative forms, which are essential for operational clarity and urgency. These imperative constructions are often direct and unequivocal, as illustrated in examples (*Secure the perimeter!*, *Move to checkpoint 4 immediately!*).

Such forms serve to provide clear, actionable instructions that leave little room for ambiguity. In time-sensitive and hierarchical settings, these unambiguous forms of commands are critical for operational efficiency. However, commands also exhibit syntactic variation depending on the context. In more formal or procedural scenarios, commands may be delivered using modalized expressions or embedded structures, such as: (*You will proceed to objective Alpha by 04:00 hours; All units are to remain on standby until further notice*).

These structures convey obligation and anticipation while maintaining a formal tone, particularly in written directives or during higher-level operations. The modal verbs (will, must, are to) reflect a sense of authority and urgency, yet they also soften the imperative force, making them suitable for high-level communications or orders issued to senior officers.

This syntactic flexibility demonstrates the military's ability to adapt its language according to the rank of the addressee, the urgency of the situation, and the formality of the context.

2. Pragmatic function of commands. The pragmatic function of commands extends beyond their surface form to encompass the illocutionary force – the intended social action of the command – and its perlocutionary effect – the outcome or behavior that results from the command.

In military discourse, the illocutionary force is often tied to the speaker's rank and authority, with commands acting as performative acts designed to elicit immediate action. For example: "*I want everyone ready by 05:00*"

→ Though this is a declarative statement expressing a desire, in the context of a superior officer speaking to subordinates, it functions as a performative command. The pragmatic force lies not in the structure of the utterance but in its institutional authority.

Similarly, some military commands take on a mitigated or indirect form to soften the impact of the directive, particularly in multinational or culturally diverse environments: "*Let's maintain radio silence*"

→ While technically a suggestion, this utterance is used to signal a collective directive, commonly employed in multinational operations where maintaining politeness and mutual respect is crucial. In these contexts, indirectness mitigates face-threatening acts while still achieving compliance.

Non-verbal cues – such as tone, body language, and even the use of gestures - are often used alongside verbal commands to reinforce authority and clarity. For instance, a commander may issue a command while simultaneously pointing to a target area, ensuring that the directive is visually reinforced and immediately understood.

Furthermore, the perlocutionary effect of military commands is critical. A command that is misunderstood or delayed can have severe operational consequences, especially in high-stakes situations like combat operations or tactical maneuvers. The immediate compliance of subordinates is paramount, and this reinforces the centrality of pragmatic competence in ensuring that commands are understood and acted upon without delay.

3. Sociolinguistic context of command language. The sociolinguistic dynamics of military commands underscore how language functions as a reflection of institutional roles, hierarchical structures, and cultural norms. These elements significantly influence both the form and interpretation of commands.

Rank and authority: The most notable feature of military command language is its deep embedding within rank-based hierarchies. Higher-ranking officers are typically more direct in their use of imperatives, whereas subordinates may adopt more formal or indirect language when addressing superiors. This distinction ensures that power dynamics are respected and institutional order is maintained.

Cultural sensitivity in multinational operations: In multinational or cross-cultural settings, linguistic and pragmatic differences in command realization become more pronounced. For instance, an officer from a British military background might say: “*Could you cover that sector, please?*”.

This form of modalized indirectness reflects British politeness norms, where directives are often softened to avoid appearing overly authoritative. In contrast, an officer from the U.S. military might issue a more direct command: “*Cover that sector now!*”.

This reflects American military norms, where clarity and immediacy often outweigh the need for politeness markers. These variations in politeness strategies demonstrate the importance of cross-cultural pragmatics in multinational military operations, where the balance between directness and diplomacy is crucial for maintaining effective communication and coordination.

Institutional lexicon: A recurring theme in military command language is the use of standardized terminology and lexical economy. Specific terms such as “*weapons free*” “*hold your position*” or “*abort mission*” are entrenched in military discourse and carry precise meanings within operational contexts. The standardized lexicon ensures that all personnel, regardless of rank or linguistic background, interpret commands in the same way, thereby promoting operational unity and efficiency.

The elliptical nature of many military commands further emphasizes the need for brevity and precision. For example, an officer might say: “*On me!*” → Meaning, “*Follow me!*”; “*Go hot!*” → Meaning, “*You are authorized to open fire*”.

These elliptical expressions are common in high-intensity environments, where speed is paramount, and personnel are expected to understand commands instantly, based on shared operational knowledge.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the linguistic and pragmatic aspects of command language in military discourse. Through examining the syntactic structures, pragmatic functions, and sociolinguistic contexts of military commands, the research offers valuable insights into how language serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a mechanism for authority, coordination, and operational effectiveness in military settings.

The findings of this study highlight several key aspects of military command language:

Syntactic realization: Military commands are primarily expressed through direct imperative forms that ensure clarity and precision. However, variation exists depending on the context, with more modalized or formal constructions appearing in written or high-level directives.

Pragmatic function: Commands in military discourse serve as performative acts that elicit immediate action, and their illocutionary force is strongly linked to the rank and authority of the speaker. Indirect forms of command are also employed to soften the force of directives in multicultural or high-context settings.

Sociolinguistic context: The use of command language is deeply influenced by social hierarchies, institutional norms, and cultural values. Rank-based authority shapes the directness of command forms, and the sociocultural background of participants influences both the delivery and reception of commands, particularly in multinational operations.

Implications for military communication

The study underscores the importance of clear, precise communication in military settings, where the consequences of misinterpretation can be severe. It highlights the necessity for pragmatic competence in ensuring that commands are understood and acted upon promptly, especially in high-stakes situations.

Moreover, the findings reveal that cross-cultural communication strategies play a significant role in multinational military operations, where linguistic and pragmatic differences can impact the success of collaborative efforts. The study suggests that understanding these differences is crucial for fostering cooperation and avoiding misunderstandings during joint operations.

Recommendations for future research

While this study offers a detailed analysis of military command language, several areas remain ripe for further investigation:

Psycholinguistic aspects of command language: Future research could explore how cognitive processes, such as attention, memory, and decision-making, influence the interpretation of military commands. Understanding the cognitive mechanisms involved in command comprehension could provide deeper insights into optimizing communication in high-pressure environments.

Technological mediation of military communication: As technology increasingly mediates communication in military operations, particularly in digital and remote settings, it would be valuable to examine how commands are communicated via digital platforms (*e.g., via secure messaging, drones, or virtual command centers*) and the effects of such mediation on their clarity and impact.

Cross-linguistic comparisons: A comparative study of military command language across different languages and military institutions could reveal universal patterns as well as language-specific strategies for issuing commands. This could be especially valuable for multinational forces and peacekeeping missions, where effective communication is critical to operational success.

Training and standardization: Another important area for future research could involve the development of training programs for military personnel, focusing on enhancing pragmatic awareness and intercultural competence in command communication. Such programs could help standardize command language across diverse units and military forces, improving overall operational effectiveness.

In conclusion, the study of military command language provides essential insights into the complex interplay between language, power, and coordination in military operations. By analyzing how commands are syntactically constructed, pragmatically realized, and sociolinguistically contextualized, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of military discourse and its role in ensuring the success of military endeavors.

As military operations become increasingly multinational and technology-driven, the need for effective and culturally sensitive communication strategies has never been greater. The findings of this study not only highlight the importance of linguistic and pragmatic expertise in military contexts but also lay the groundwork for future research that can enhance the effectiveness of military communication across diverse settings.

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