

Linguistic Sources of Coalition Miscommunication*

Stephen Poteet¹, Ping Xue¹, Jitu Patel², Anne Kao¹, Cheryl Giammanco³

& Iya Whiteley⁴

Boeing Phantom Works
P.O. Box 3707 MC 7L-43
Seattle, WA 98124-2207

stephen.r.poteet@pss.boeing.com

ABSTRACT

Current major military deployments almost always involve collaboration between multinational teams. Joint operations often face operationally and environmentally complex and dynamic scenarios. Effective and efficient communication is a key enabler to success; however, the diverse backgrounds of multinational teams have presented serious challenges in coalition communication. This on-going exploratory study investigates miscommunications between US and UK military personnel (and civilians working with them). It focuses on understanding miscommunication due to differences in language forms and language use, including the context of use. Based on the data collected from a set of semi-structured interviews of military personnel, this study identified a number of categories and patterns of miscommunication. The preliminary results have presented a number of implications for improving communication between UK and US teams, which can serve as insights for improving multinational team communication in general.

INTRODUCTION

English is claimed to be the first global language, particularly for commerce and diplomacy [1]. As a lingua franca, English does promote inter-cultural communication; however it can also be an object of misunderstanding as demonstrated by Verschueren [2] from his study of international news reporting. It is believed that misunderstanding is due to an extant knowledge of English accompanied by insufficient knowledge of English-speaking societies and cultures leading the hearer to “improvise inferential solutions – to construct the final message – based on divergent socio-cultural realities.” ([3] p. 2). The differences can be explained in terms of cross-cultural pragmatics such as differences in speech acts and modes of interactions between English speaker’s and hearer’s language [4].

The English language has many dialects (e.g., British, Australian, American,) that can differ from each-other quite significantly. Indeed, problems of miscommunication are common throughout the English-speaking world, “as almost every Briton learns on his first day in America” ([5] p. 2). Unfortunately, any potential

¹ Boeing Phantom Works, Seattle, US

² Dstl, UK

³ ARL, Aberdeen Proving Grounds, US

⁴ Systems Engineering & Assessment Ltd., UK



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miscommunication may go unnoticed as when “an Irish mother tells an English teacher that her child is *backward*, meaning *shy* whereas the teacher assumes she means *retarded*.” ([6] p. 335). Even in environments such as air-traffic control, with controlled language and processes, miscommunications between pilots and control towers have led to air disasters and near-disasters [7]. Ironically, it is the “common” language that is often the biggest cause of communication breakdown.

The implications for miscommunication in the military could result in loss of life. Given that all recent Western military deployments have involved collaborations among multiple nations, breakdown in communication between allies could jeopardise the success of the operation. With the increase in missions beyond traditional warfare, coalition forces have taken on additional tasks in peace keeping and humanitarian relief thus creating added challenges to the communications among multinational coalition forces. Recent studies have shown that there are serious challenges in coalition communication due to the diverse backgrounds among multinational groups and team members [8, 9].

The purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate the linguistic aspects of the miscommunications, the relationship between cultural differences and variety of language use, and their impact on miscommunication. We are particularly interested in differences in the use of English by US and UK military forces, especially the differences due to training and culture.

STUDY QUESTIONS

There are many issues and parameters that are relevant to causes of miscommunication. Given our primary objectives and given our understanding of the current issues, we are focusing on cultural aspects, linguistic aspects and the relation between these two aspects of human communication. As Algeo [10] pointed out, “British and American English, like all dialects of the same language, differ from one another in complex ways”, and the cultural differences between UK and US are a major cause of linguistic variations between these two dialects. If these observations are generally true, they must also be true in the military domain. In fact, we expect special complications in the military domain due to their unique constraints and characteristics. In the light of the study by Algeo and other studies reported in the literature this research proposes two initial hypotheses.

- (i) There will be linguistic differences at different levels of language use between the British and American military that will lead to misunderstanding, which could have a significant impact on operations.
- (ii) There are cultural differences between the British and American military that will impact on language use and lead to misunderstanding, which could have a significant impact on operations.

Study Aim

This exploratory study aims to examine and identify categories and patterns of miscommunication due to variations of language use. Miscommunication manifests in a number of ways and at different levels of language use. Some instances of miscommunication are simply due to lexical differences, which are not closely related to culture. Examples include use of synonymy (i.e., denotation of one referent by two or more linguistic forms), or use of polysemy (i.e., one linguistic form denotes two or more referents). Differences in styles of communication are more closely associated with cultures. For example, a cultural tendency to understatement may result in a misunderstanding of the extent of a problem. Social status and context may



impact interpretation. Such examples include differences in habitual inferences, e.g. a simple order by a commander to “go to” a certain location suspected of being friendly to hostiles may be interpreted by one group as a command to take that area by force but by another as simply an order to go there and assess the situation. This needs clarifying [for a multinational audience!], a bit confusing Misinterpreting the intended speech act, e.g., what was offered by a commander as an observation or statement may be interpreted by subordinates as an order (or vice versa).

Participants

Participants in this pilot study (N=8) were UK and US military officers who had experienced miscommunications with coalition partners from the other nation during military planning and operations. There were eight male participants, five UK nationals with prior experience of working with the US military and three US nationals working on an exchange program in the UK. Participation was voluntary and there was no compensation.

Method of Data Capture

A short e-mail survey was administered to screen participants based on their experience in U.K. and U.S. coalition operations. Once selected, participants read a Research Subject Information Form that described the purpose of the study, procedures, benefits, risks, confidentiality, and point of contact. Participants were given an opportunity to withdraw or decline being audio-taped. Then, participants were interviewed individually (face-to-face or via telephone) by one or more researchers for sixty to ninety minutes. Participants provided examples of their experiences with miscommunications during military planning and operations. The interviews were semi-structured. Participants described the nature of the miscommunication, its source (semantics and pragmatics, procedures and doctrine, or mental models) and context (i.e., the type of operation, their role in it, and the mode of communication). They were asked when the miscommunication was identified, what was the effect of the miscommunication on performance, and how it was resolved. Finally, participants were given an opportunity to provide a rationale for the miscommunication and consider whether it would have occurred if the operation were not multi-national. Participants agreed to be contacted for follow-up questions if necessary. Audio-taped interviews were transcribed for thematic analysis.

INITIAL FINDINGS

Currently only half of the interviews (N=4) have been completed and analysed, however the initial data largely supports our two hypotheses. Various types of linguistic differences exist at various levels of language use between the British and American military which can lead to misunderstandings. Cultural differences result in variations of language use in different ways as shown by the example below.

Use of Acronyms

Acronyms can pose a problem because they are not known by everyone. In this sense, they are similar to slang and jargon. Acronyms, of course, are not confined to the military; they pose a problem in most large businesses and organizations. One of our interviewees, a US exchange officer in the UK, reported seeing briefings that he had difficulty following because of the extensive use of acronyms and jargon. He also noted



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that certain specifically British military acronyms (“SO1” for Staff Officer 1, “SO2” etc.)⁵ are unknown to most American military personnel unless they have spent time with British troops.

Use of Slang and Colloquialisms

Everyone does not just speak a single, monolithic language. Rather, we each have several different registers or styles that we use as appropriate. The language we speak with friends in informal settings can differ in pronunciation, word choice and grammatical complexity from the language we speak in more formal settings. In informal settings, we are more likely to use slang and colloquialisms. These can be very expressive, not only adding colour to our speech but also signalling a sense of camaraderie. Colloquialisms typically originate among a small group and spread slowly from there and may not spread very far. As a result, people outside that group are less likely to understand the colloquialisms than they would for more standard or formal words or expressions. This is true for different national dialects such as British English vs. American English. As a result, colloquialisms are more likely to be misunderstood when used in a coalition setting. For example, an interviewee reported that he was training a UK Forward Air Controller (FAC), who was directing a US pilot. The trainee tried to direct him to a road between two different coloured fields but the pilot reported that he had clear contact with the “dirt ball road” with no reference to the fields. The trainee did not understand the expression and kept pressing him to respond whether he saw the two coloured fields but the pilot kept responding that he had contact with the dirt ball road. Finally the instructor (the interviewee) had to step in and clarify the situation. Here the use of a colloquialism is compounded with the inflexibility of both the pilot and the trainee to try to describe things in different terms, an aspect of communicative strategy.

Use of Jargon

Another kind of language register that by definition is limited to a smaller group is jargon. Jargon is language that tends to be limited to a specific trade, business or professional group. It not only allows its speakers to communicate succinctly and precisely about their tools and concepts, but can perform a function similar to slang, that is, identifying its users as part of a group or fraternity. Like slang, jargon serves an important function for members of the group that it belongs to, but when used outside that group, it can be potentially confusing.

As an illustration of the value of jargon, an interviewee reported that he had less problem than one might have expected on his job because his role was very technical and the British and American technicians used the same language. So jargon in general technical domains (e.g. information technology) often cuts across national cultures. However, there are contextual differences which do create communication problems, for example, people working night operations use different equipment (e.g. night vision equipment) may say things that are unintelligible to the daytime operators who are not familiar with the equipment.

Misinterpreted Speech Act

Beyond the lexical or terminological level of language are aspects of linguistic pragmatics or language use, including the speech act performed by an utterance. Language is used to do more than simply make statements or assertions. It can be used to question, to promise, to request, to greet, to congratulate, even to marry (“I hereby pronounce you man and wife.”). While there is sometimes a syntactic correlate of the speech act (in English, typical questions have the first auxiliary verb before the subject), this is not always the case and often what looks like one speech act on the surface is really another speech act. For example, the apparent question “Do you have the time?” is actually a request to tell the speaker the time.

⁵ In fact, SO1 is not really an acronym but a title.



One of the most familiar examples of speech act, which is not limited to military personnel or situations, was reported by an interviewee who is a US exchange staff in UK. A standard UK greeting “Are you all right?” was interpreted by him as a question about his health or situation, and initially responded accordingly. Unlike some simple lexical differences he reported that this misunderstanding took a while to understand.

Semantics versus Pragmatics

There is one example that is rather singular in that it combines a number of different factors. The US communications officer reported that there was a US Navy ship that left his port and their supplier mentioned some problems they had with briefing about some supplies. The UK logistics officer sent him an email thanking him for his comments and noted that they would have to improve part of the process. He told the supplier that they would have to write up an “Idiot’s Guide” for this process to ensure that the problem did not arise again. In the UK, “Idiot’s Guide” refers to books on a variety of topics that are introductory in nature. In America, the same type of books are called a “Dummies’ Guide”. The (American) supplier was unaware of this UK usage and thought that the logistics officer was impugning his intelligence, suggesting he was an idiot. He reported it up the chain and it eventually got to the logistics officer’s commanding officer. The commanding officer knew and liked the logistics officer and assured his command that it must have been due to a misunderstanding and the logistics officer contacted the supplier and resolved the issue.

There are a number of factors that led to this misunderstanding. For instance, although it involves a lexical difference, the UK “Idiot’s Guide” versus the US “Dummies’ Guide”, the misunderstanding is primarily one of connotation rather than denotation; it is not so much that the American supplier did not understand that the logistics officer meant a set of instructions to help people perform this process without problems, it was rather that “Idiot’s Guide” to the American supplier had negative connotations, implying only an idiot would need these instructions. Interestingly, both “dummy” and “idiot” have this connotation in both the US and the UK, but in the context of “Guide” they have each lost this connotation in one of the countries.

There is another cluster of factors that led to the misunderstanding. The UK logistics officer had been trying very hard to adapt to American linguistic conventions, using American spelling and words as much as possible. His communication with the American supplier was via email, so the American had no basis for knowing that the logistics officer was not American, based on his spelling and word choice. If the interaction had been face-to-face or even through ‘phone or radio, the UK logistics officer’s accent would have cued the supplier that the person he was talking to was not American. So the use of a British phrase was interpreted in the context of coming from another American, so there was not reason to believe that the phrase might have had a different meaning or connotation for the speaker than it did for him.

This also perhaps illustrates the effect of not using a standard or neutral style or register. The logistics officer used the more colloquial “Idiot’s Guide” rather than “a set of procedures” probably to express camaraderie and possibly to inject a bit of colour or humour; however, as noted above, colloquialisms also tend to be more parochial than more standard or formal expressions and are more likely to be misunderstood, as this instance was.

Finally, unlike many of the instances of lexical miscommunication, this was not an instance of a failure to understand but rather of a misunderstanding, a communication that was believed to have succeeded on both parts, but had in fact failed to meet the intended effect.



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CONCLUSION

In this exploratory study, we have looked at a small sample of anecdotes of miscommunication between UK and US military groups. . We have identified various types of linguistic variations and cultural differences manifested by the US and UK groups. American English and British English differ in complex ways not only in terms of lexical differences but also, perhaps more importantly, in terms of language use due to cultural differences. The initial findings suggest that there are indeed cases of misunderstanding between US and UK personnel and that some of these could impact on operations.

The results indicate that much needs to be studied about the current coalition communication patterns, styles and other characteristics of language use. This would then help in identifying appropriate strategies and tools that need to be developed to improve process and cognitive interoperability among multinational forces. Importantly, the current analysis suggests that many relevant issues are largely pragmatic in nature, beyond not only lexical and grammatical differences but also “semantic” similarity of the communication content. This supports our on-going efforts to develop a computational pragmatics methodology.

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