

## **LANGUAGE OF THE MILITARY AS A MEANS OF ENCRYPTION**

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### **Abstract**

Language, in various spheres of interaction has a reciprocal relationship. This implies that language shapes our ideas and interactions much in the same way that interactions shape language. People think in the language they learn, solve their problems in that medium. They learn experiences in that medium and convey by way of opinions, advice, requests, instructions or commands which they have learned to others. The military, as a unit of society has its language which is necessary because of the delicate nature of its operation. The aim of this study is to examine the use of an alternative vocabulary which in this sense, refers to the registers or jargons which are peculiar to the military for its peculiar needs. The data which was sourced from observation and others mainly from Nairaland, includes English and French terminologies that are associated with the military. The data was analyzed using relevance theory. Finding shows that the military has been able to maintain a high level of confidence in its operations because it encodes and upgrades its lexicon. The study concludes that the initiative of the military to have its terminology is commendable.

**Key words:** Jargons, Language, Military, Relevance theory

### **Introduction**

Language is an essential part of human communication, which is often entangled with power dynamics that affects how people and groups exercise power, create social structures, and uphold hierarchies. A significant benefit of language is that it is used as a tool to exert dominance, maintain inequality as well as bring about societal change and resistance.

“Language is the main channel of a person socialization, his inclusion in the cultural and historical experience of each nation and humanity as a whole” (Palekha et al. 2016, p.324-327). The military by its nature is vested with power which it exerts through the instrument of language. It deploys specialized language known as military jargon to communicate systems, positions and geographies. The Nigeria military like its U.S. counterpart uses many unique items and concepts that civilians are not exposed to. They resort to the use of special terminology because of the need for expedient and clear communication which distinguishes and keeps them in a linguistic world apart from the daily life of a civilian. Within the military, the use of shorthand makes communication more efficient, although it can be confusing to civilian listeners. The military language is specialized and used by all the various members in communication. There might be slight differences that exist among them because of the different operations and activities carried out by them. It has at least three characteristics that are revealed through linguistic analysis. According to Dauber is the characteristics are it tends to be sanitized form of language; it emphasizes the expertise of those who use it and it contains a specific notion of hierarchy by its users”

There is the need for Armed forces formation to have some code words (terminologies) that facilitate the necessary interconnection between military personnel in their operations in order to prevent unauthorized access to information. Essentially, in order to understand the role of English as an international language studies such as (Poteet et al., 2008; Rasmussen & Sieck, 2012; Rasmussen, Sieck, & Smart, 2009; Sieck & Patel, 2007) have interpreted the all-encompassing role of English as causing problems and barriers to adaptability, mainly because of the differences individuals bring together into coalitions. The differences in cultural backgrounds, orientation, discipline, values and norms are partly responsible for the need to have a special code of communication. Even more complex and challenging is the strategic effort of communicating with the local population, frequently mediated by intercultural relations. The issue brings to the fore the close interrelation of language and cross-cultural competences, particularly significant for the military (Abbe, Gulik, & Herman, 2007; Hummel & Siska, 2011; Lunt, 2008; Stier, 2006; Watson, 2010). The military which comprise the Army, the Navy and the Air Force use the slang, parlance and jargon which differentiates their language from other groups and organizations. This goes to legalize the appropriateness of the language of military parade.

The military activities of the George W. Bush administration offer a case in point. As many scholars have noted (Hodges 2013, Jackson 2005, Silberstein 2002), the administration rapidly framed the events of September 11, 2001 (referred to hereafter as 9/11) as an “act of war” that demanded reciprocation. In the Bush administration's regime of truth, which operated rather like a marketing campaign (Hodges 2011), the terms “terror” and “war” were brought into rhetorical alignment to justify military retaliation in Afghanistan. With next to no evidence, Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein were subsequently pulled into a discursive relationship of “adequation” (Bucholtz & Hall 2005 in Hodges 2013), being positioned as if similar and even existentially linked, helping rationalize Congressional approval of action against Iraq. US media narratives about Islam portrayed it as antithetical to “rights,” particularly women's rights (Lemons 2007), while talk of “evil,” of a faceless Muslim enemy, and of the vague imperative to protect American “freedom” suffused public discourse in the United States, rationalizing violent acts against overseas peoples who had nothing to do with 9/11.

The language of expertise marks any professional community. Indeed, the ability to use and understand specific technical language is a large part of what determines membership in professional communities. This aspect of technical and professional language is even more marked when the language is in large part characterized by acronyms and jargon that in effect create another language altogether. Technical language of this type emphasizes the expertise necessary for participation and therefore implicitly makes the argument that knowledge of the language serves in effect as a threshold for participation: If you cannot understand and use the language, you mark yourself as being unqualified to participate in the technical debates taking place. This is equally true of official documents emanating from military establishments in the same way as those written by doctors, lawyers, or engineers. English is the official language in the Nigerian military although Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa languages are sometimes used during civil-military cooperation (CIMIC), activities or interrogation. It is important to note that some of the terminologies are easily understood by the users because of the shared contextual experience.

### **Literature Review**

The Nigerian Armed Forces (NAF) are the military forces of Nigeria. The armed forces consist of three service branches: the Nigerian Army, Nigerian Navy, and Nigerian Air Force. At independence, Nigeria

inherited from the British colonial administration a military force which comprised the Army and Navy. There was no Air Force until 1964. Nigeria inherited a small military force from the British colonialist which had developed over the years from an amalgamation of relatively small constabularies. Since independence the Nigerian military had undergone tremendous growth as from the commencement of the country's civil war in 1967. The country has participated in several peace-keeping operations. By 1990, the Nigerian Armed Forces had grown in terms of manpower development, which includes training within and outside the country, development of indigenous training institutions, acquisition of modern and sophisticated war machines.

The military like any systematized group appreciates order thus, hierarchy plays a major role in both the official and social interactions. The principle of hierarchy and respect are always emphasized at every occasion such that the junior officer must ask for permission to do anything. Respect for constituted authority is so great in the army that soldiers hardly do anything without gaining permission from the appropriate quarter. Akande (2017, p.28) observed that, expressions such as, 'permission to buy you (or every-one) a drink, sir!' at social interactions is common much in the same way that the expression 'Sir! May I have your permission to carry on with the parade is noticed in official communication.

The identity of the military personnel can be distinguished through their verbal interactions and the use of a certain military register. This study seeks to examine how soldiers make use of linguistic resources available to them to express, negotiate, and construct their occupational identity. The purpose of the article, therefore, is to analyze the use of military vocabulary as a means of encrypting their codes in their various interactions.

### **Language and the Military**

As with most specialized language forms, focusing on the function that language plays within an organization is not sufficient. All use of language bears an implicit logic about the world that can provide insight into the organization responsible for that language. Put more broadly, whenever a specialized language exists for the use of a particular group, that language can provide useful evidence in understanding the way the group views itself, its role in the larger world, and the world as a whole.

Language use carries with it, implicit arguments, which can be made explicit through careful analysis in order better to assess the world

view the language helps to create and sustain. Thomson (2023) defines jargon as “special words or expressions used by a profession or group that are difficult for others to understand. She also adds that term jargon also has a negative connotation going by another definition which emphasizes that they are sometimes derogatory.

It is the language or mode of communication known and understood by only members of that profession” Jargon which the language of military parade comes under is defined by Hornby as “words or expressions that are used by a particular profession or group of people, and are difficult for others to understand”. Hartman and Stock also define jargon as “a set of terms or expressions used by a social and occupational group but not used and often not understood by the speech community as a whole”. Chambers on the other hand describes jargons as the terminologies of a profession. The common denominator in all the definitions is that the expressions are known and understood by people within the profession who use them. The military language also uses slang which is defined by Watson and Hill as a: “colloquial language whose words and usages are not generally acceptable within formal modes of expression” (267). Slang is unique to or originates with the armed forces. It often takes the form of abbreviations or acronyms and incorporates aspects of formal military concepts and terms. This is often used to reinforce or reflect (usually friendly and humorous terms).

In the modern military, the training manuals are updated every few years, and as such, the language contained within the manual’s changes with each edition, even if ever so slightly. Mount Training for example, came along as a soldier task around 2004 and was added to subsequent TRADOC 600-4 publications to ensure that soldiers knew how to conduct mounted vehicle operations that were standard operating procedure in Iraq. The language changes, however, not simply because of the introduction of new terms or procedures. The changes are often the result of cultural shifts within the military itself. For example, when new technology arrives, new tactics evolve to best use it. The gas mask, the Humvee, mobile artillery, and the fragmentation 4 grenade all led to tactical changes that influenced military culture.

The use of language always has embedded within it, these implicit arguments. A statement as simple as, “Forward presence is a vital naval mission,” contains a variety of assumptions about the likelihood of future conflict, the likely locations of future conflicts, the probability that future conflicts will involve national interests, and the way military power can be manipulated to affect the chance of conflict starting. Language, then,

constructs a social reality. Official military language has at least three characteristics that are revealed through linguistic analysis. It tends to be a sanitized form of language; it emphasizes the expertise of those who use it; and it contains a specific notion of hierarchy.

Euphemistic language serves to mask and deemphasize what the words actually refer to; for example, it is easier to refer to “surgical strikes” and “collateral damage” than to bombing attacks in which civilians are killed. Such indirect language is especially notable in military discussions about the use of nuclear weapons: phrases like “first,” “second,” or “preemptive” strikes, or “ride out” and “assured destruction” are preferred over those connoting apocalyptic levels of destruction. By the same token, this creation of what is virtually another language not only builds a wall between the insider and the outsider but simultaneously reinforces the connection between those who are masters of the form. The ability to control and manipulate an insider linguistic form identifies one as a member of the institution, forging an automatic link between people who have the same ability, while reinforcing the distinction between these insiders and outsiders. Indeed, military service has its own jargon, acronyms, phrases. Not only do different services use different terms; sometimes the same word can mean different things to different services.

Dawes (2002) observes the effects of war upon language and the ways in which language, in turn, influences war. Dawes (2002, p.15) notes that “Wars are born and sustained in rivers of language about what it means to serve a cause, to kill the enemy, and to die with dignity; and they are reintegrated into a collective historical self-understanding through a ritualistic overplus of the language of commemoration”. While not specifically elucidating a dialect of the soldier, Dawes discusses the effects of war on the language of entire societies. Yet another form of official language is used when the military communicates with those on the outside. During conflict, for example, official rhetoric can emphasize the humanitarian concerns with which we go to war, or can distract attention from the costs that are inevitably involved in the use of military power. Descriptions center on the technology that has been destroyed, so that there are reports of the number of sorties successfully completed, the number of aircraft or tanks destroyed. This permits a focus on the objects, the things, and away from the people close to or within the objects destroyed.

In the United States, for instance, Hodges (2013) discusses a “generic presidential war schema” in which commanders-in-chief follow certain formulae to legitimize military action, drawing on just war theory to

present their violence as ethical and American motives as positive, while projecting a simplistic antipathy between “us” and (a tyrannical) “them.”

### **Methods and Theory**

Relevance theory is a cognitive theory of pragmatics that was developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986) as a framework for understanding the interpretation of utterances in cognitive linguistics and pragmatics. The theory is based on Grice’s (1975) Cooperative Principle (CP) which has the basic idea that in interpreting an utterance, hearers assume the Cooperative Principle and the maxims have been observed. Other key ingredients of relevance theory are that utterances are ostensive (they draw their addressees' attention to the fact that the communicator wants to convey some information) and inferential (the addressee has to infer what the communicator wanted to convey, based on the utterance's "literal meaning" along with the addressee's real world knowledge, sensory input, and other information). Relevance theory aims to explain the well recognised fact that communicators usually convey much more information with their utterances than what is contained in their literal sense. To this end, Sperber and Wilson argue that acts of human verbal communication are ostensive in that they draw their addressees' attention to the fact that the communicator wants to convey some information. In this way they automatically assert that they are "relevant" to their addressees.

Relevance theory is built on the principle that the human communication process includes: encoding, transferring and decoding of messages aided by reference and context. The theory assumes that human communication is intentional in the sense that it creates an expectation which makes it easy for an audience or addressee to decode message the communicator wishes to put across. (Clark 2013) submits that communication can be achieved through language or actions that point to the audience or person that the communicator intends to communicate something he/she presumes relevant which triggers specific types of expectations in the addressee.

In the process of communication, cognitive context shows the surrounding world in which the two sides of verbal communication get along with each other, while the mutual reflection shows that both sides of verbal communication understand and clearly understand the topic or a fact they are talking with. The greater the cognitive context in which the two sides of verbal communication get along, the greater the probability that the two sides of communication may achieve mutual manifestness, and the

more likely they are to achieve the most effective communication effect. Mutual Knowledge and Mutual Manifestness Coordination between speakers and hearers relies, in general, on contextual information and ‘general knowledge’ accessible to both. According to Sperber & Wilson’s relevance theory, both sides of communication try to make as little effort as possible to get as much communication effect as possible. In fact, both sides of communication can establish relevance in the process of reasoning by making up for the lack of communication information and reasoning correction, which makes the communicative intention of the communicator fully reflected. Look at the following conversation:

**Example:**

Husband: I’m tired.

Wife: I’ll make the meal.

This is a very simple dialogue. From the perspective of communication intention, it is likely that there is pragmatic ambiguity in the husband’s words. When it comes to cooking time, a sentence “I am tired” conveys the meaning of politeness, request, statement, etc. And the context in the communication process is a variable. If there is not enough context information, the husband’s words can also have several kinds of contextual interpretations, such as he is so tired that he doesn’t want to talk, doesn’t want to do housework, wants to take a bath first, wants to have a little rest, etc. It can be seen from the dialogue that the wife’s understanding is that “the husband politely expresses that he does not want to cook or do housework”. In order to establish a connection between the wife’s answer and the husband’s words, we should use relevance reasoning, and the specific reasoning process includes the following steps:

P1: Meal is not ready. And there should be someone to make it.

P2: There are only husband and wife in the house who can make meals.

P3: So, either husband or wife will make the meal.

P4: The husband is tired, that means he will not make the meal.

P5: So wife is the only one available to make it. Otherwise, she is not cooperative. The relevance of this exchange is made manifest by the wife’s response.

This study is a qualitative research which entails a descriptive and textual analysis. It relied on primary and secondary data sources. The secondary sources included research works and academic papers.



Terminologies or military code in English and French words were purposively collected from two sources: observation method and Nairaland, a weblog, which Galleria (2021) describes as the second most visited Nigerian website although Statista (2022), rates it as the sixth most visited website in Nigeria. The sampled data numbered Text 1 -15 were subjected to qualitative analysis by employing the theoretical tenets of Sperber and Wilson (1986). The choice of the theory was hinged on the fact that the theory recognizes context from both psychological perspective, mutual knowledge, mutual manifestness coordination and 'general knowledge'. These contextual tools are what the study relied on for the data analysis.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

The data comprised twenty expressions which served as primary data, were obtained from Nairaland, an online media forum. The primary consideration for the selection of data was the fact that it reflected the social and formal domains of interactions. Secondary data sources included published literary and scholarly materials on the study focus. The study is both qualitative and descriptive so allows for textual and social analysis.

#### **Text 1: Six o'clock**

Military connotation: rear, behind.

Example: "Bravo 2, watch our six!"

**Discussion:** From the perspective of communication intention, and from our understanding of a clock, six o'clock is the side of the clock that appears to 'moves backwards' but in military jargon, it means behind. The word, "six o'clock" gives the impression that a specific time is required for an activity. In a communication process, context is a variable which may cause a word to have several kinds of contextual interpretations. In order to establish a connection between the clock and the given meaning, the application of relevance that listeners who operate in the same environment will use meaning relevant to their mutual knowledge.

#### **Text 2: Twelve o'clock**

Military connotation: in front of.

**Discussion:** Based on Sperber and Wilson's assertion, information can be relevant in one context and not in another and that has been observed in this expression. To a non-initiate, twelve o'clock signifies either midnight or noon but between people who share the same background in the military, the expression does not have anything to with time keeping but a position

which has been informed by the movement of the clock. From the connotation, it is obvious that the position of 12 o'clock which appears to point in the direction of 'go' shows a forward moment; this is where relevance comes in.

**Text 3:** Mag(s): magazine

Military connotation: it is also known as clips in which bullets are stored, fixed into an automatic weapon, and fired.

**Discussion:** A literate person or journalist will most likely think of a periodical publication when he hears the word 'mag'. A fashion-conscious lady on the other hand may have an image of a glossy magazine, for example, a women's weekly magazine but for the military man, a magazine (mag) means serious business because without it, his life could be in danger. So, to "I packed you extra mags" means there is extra ammunition. Thus, the application of contextual knowledge makes it clear as the type of mag a speaker means.

**Text 4:** Frag(s): hand grenade (an explosive, bomb.)

Example: "He got hit by a frag."

**Discussion:** 'Frag' in the military means to deliberately injure or kill a military leader by means of a fragmentation grenade. Frag is also a type of board game which has players known as 'fraggers' but in writing, a sentence fragment is an error of missing sentence parts which make the sentence look disjointed. To the military man, frags conveys a sense of caution particularly the senior officers who could probably become victims of fragging if they are not careful.

**Text 5:** Clear

Military connotation: no danger.

**Discussion:** The word clear seems to have many connotations in military usage. For a person who share mutual knowledge, clear means the area is free from danger. It could also mean that one should check for danger in one's immediate environment. The word 'clear' seems to have some connotation as the expression, 'as clear as crystal' or 'the coast is clear'. To that extent, the example, 'clear left/right' means both sides are free. On the other hand, the expression, 'clear the target location' means the area should be checked for any sign of danger. So, in whatever context the word clear is used, it implies that everything is alright.

**Text 6: Copy**

Military connotation: read or hear.

**Discussion:** The word ‘copy’ in plain terms means to imitate and in other usages indicates that a message has been received and equally understood. In the military, copy is used in communication between stations to indicate that the message has been received. If someone says, "Base, do you copy?", what the person has basically done is to ask if the message has been received and understood.

**Text 7: Esprit de corps (French)**

Military connotation: Bond of honour among the military

**Discussion:** The expression esprit de corps is a French word which literarily means ‘in the spirit of the body’. It was meant to foster unity among people who considered themselves to be one body or team. In the military it was used to describe the morale of the troops to show camaraderie amongst soldiers. Each unit of the military use it to show team spirit. The same is also observed in Nigeria. One arm of the military extends solidarity to the other arms such there is hardly any clash between the various arms of the military contrary to what occurs between the civilians and the military.

**Text 8: Bloody civilian**

Military connotation: non-military person

**Discussion:** ‘Bloody civilian’ is a term that is used by the military in a derogatory manner to describe noncombatant citizens. It is an expression of superiority over the civilians; it shows complete disregard for the civilian. The expression is not used only in Nigeria, Pakistan soldiers also use it to refer all non-military citizens of its country. ‘Bloody’ as used in ‘bloody civilian’ is seen as very British expression which means ‘extremely’ is mostly used by the military to inform its personnel of the status of an ordinary citizen.

**Text 9: Repos (French)**

Military connotation: stop all movement or activity

**Discussion:** The denotative meaning of the word is ‘rest’ or ‘quiet’. Although the connotation is similar to the actual meaning, an outsider to the military circle may not interpret it correctly without the use of context. Such a person may maintain silence and not talk because that is what he understands so he may continue with his activities quietly but in the

military, it has a different meaning. It requires that all movement or activity must stop. The activity could be social, serious or tactical.

**Text 10: La musique (French)**

Military connotation: military bombardment and gunfire

**Discussion:** The word ‘musique’ means music in English. Ordinarily, music means the expression of ideas and emotions through rhythm and melody to produce pleasant sounds. In the military, musique has a negative association although it has to do with sound from the firing of gunshots. The term musique has been used euphemistically here; it is used to disguise the unpleasantness associated with the effects of bombardment or gunfire on people. People will hardly associate the word ‘musique’ with anything terrible because sounds good to the hearing and evokes beautiful thoughts; so, using it to describe a horrible act veils the negative effect. In addition, the word could also be linked to the idiomatic expression, ‘face the music’ which means being confronted with the unpleasant consequence of one’s actions.

**Text 11: Sitrep**

Military connotation: it serves as form of acronym for situation report

**Discussion:** Situation report can be used in either administrative or martial context. It is a military term which is not easily used in conversations. It was used extensively in World War II to mean a situation report on anything from military report to description of troop deployment or even to describe the aftermath of military conflicts. The example, “Bravo 1, I need a sitrep.”, shows the referent is also military personnel because of the use of the co-text, ‘Bravo’ which is another military terminology.

**Text 12: Friendlies**

Military connotation: Persons on the same side.

**Discussion:** ‘Friendlies’ is a slang that expresses liking or goodwill, that is not antagonistic but, in the military, it refers to troops that belong to or are allied with one’s side. In football, friendlies mean matches that do not form part of a serious competition. In the military the word is a slang which is unique to or originates with the armed forces; so, the military is able to tell friendlies apart from hostile troops based on SOPs which stands for Standard Operating Procedures. For example, the sentence “You’ve got twelve tangos on deck. They are not friendlies. I repeat, they are not friendlies.”, is a warning which requires that the officers become cautious

but when the approaching party is described as ‘friendlies’ in critical situations, it conveys a sense of ease so people feel relaxed.

**Text 13: Head count**

Military connotation: The number of dead men.

**Discussion:** In general usage, the expression head count means to count the number of people present, particularly in an organization but in the military, it means to count the number of dead men. In the given example, "I need a head count!", it serves an euphemism which is mainly deployed to mask and deemphasize what the words actually refer to; for example, it is easier to refer to “surgical strikes” and “collateral damage” than to say “bombing attacks” in which civilians are killed. Someone who is not in the military will not associate head count with dead bodies. This implies that indirect language is used in the military for discussions about the use of nuclear weapons or casualties.

**Text 14: C’est midi**

Military connotation: Its impossible or it’s too late

**Discussion**

C’est midi means it is midday/noon. The general interpretation for c’est midi is its association with noon which is the time most people have lunch. The military meaning does not in any way make allusion to time but rather about impossibility. A closer look may still link it to time in the context of being too late. Lateness in some context refers to time. Therefore, this expression appears relevant to some extent.

**Text 15: Prendre une dragée**

Military connotation: To be hit

**Discussion**

To take a pill is the recommendation a doctor will make or a piece of advice a friend will suggest to another when telling the friend to take things easy. In the military, however, the expression has a negative connotation. It means to be hit. ‘To be hit’ signifies an undesirable occurrence which means to be badly hit by something such as a car or a tragedy. Thus, in the military one can be hit by a bullet and this result of the study, we found out that military words and collocations can be used both figuratively and literally

### **Concluding Remarks**

The aim of this study was to examine the use of an alternative vocabulary, which in this sense, refers to the registers or jargons which are peculiar to the military for its peculiar needs. The first objective of the study was to identify some of the terminologies of the military in Nigeria. The findings reveal that terminologies such as ‘head count’, ‘bloody civilians’ ‘repos’, ‘musique’ which are terminologies in both English and French served the same purpose of encrypting or coding the military communication. These finding echoes that of Thompson (2023) who describes jargons as a pretentious language marked by circumlocutions and long words and often tinged with derogatory connotations.

The second objective set out to examine how these terminologies have helped to maintain discretion in the military. According to Sperber and Wilson (1986) acts of human verbal communication are ostensive in that they draw their addressees' attention to the fact that the communicator wants to convey some information. In this way they automatically assert that they are "relevant" to their addressees. From the foregoing, it has been established the addresses are able to maintain relevance because they share the same linguistic and socio-cultural background. An examination of some of the terminologies reveal that without a shared knowledge or context. According to Sperber and Wilson (1986) the psychological perspective, mutual knowledge, mutual manifestness coordination and ‘general knowledge’ all aid in decoding the meaning of the terms by those with shared experience. Another significant finding is the reliance on euphemism which is mainly used to mask and deemphasize what the words actually refer. We observe this in the meaning of head count which actually means ‘the number of dead men’. To the civilian, the word does not sound threatening, but to the military, it is an unpleasant word so has to be masked. Also, the word musique is a euphemism for military bombardment and gunfire, an action that denotes fatal consequences.

The third objective was to determine the effectiveness of the use of terminologies by the military in Nigeria. The identity of the Nigerian military personnel can be distinguished through their verbal interactions and the use of a certain military register as exemplified by the use of bloody civilian which is a common slang in the military. The word ‘bloody civilian’ in an exchange between military personnel serves as a note of warning to the other personnel to be careful in divulging their secrets.

Having undertaken this study, findings have shown that the use of military vocabulary as a means of encrypting their codes in their various

interactions which emphasize their expertise and resourcefulness because if they do not divulge the meaning of their terminologies, outsiders will not easily understand or interpret it. Consequently, the study concludes that language is the main channel which is observable in the cultural and historical experience of each nation, its military and humanity as a whole.

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