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War and Linguistic Borrowing: The Influence of Military Conflicts on Lexical Expansion.

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Abstract: This article explores the phenomenon of linguistic borrowing in the context of military conflicts, with a particular focus on how war introduces new terms and phrases into languages. By analyzing wars from the 20th and 21st centuries, including World War II and modern-day conflicts, the study investigates how borrowed military terminology becomes part of the lexicon in both combatant and non-combatant countries. The study also considers how these linguistic changes reflect broader socio-political shifts. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between language and conflict, as well as the mechanisms of lexical expansion.

Keywords: linguistic borrowing, military jargon, war, lexical expansion, conflict

1. Introduction

Throughout history, military conflicts have been pivotal moments of cultural exchange, not only in terms of physical borders but also in the realm of language. War, with its intense interactions between combatants, allies, and civilians, creates an environment ripe for linguistic borrowing—where terms, phrases, and jargon from one language are integrated into another. In the chaos of conflict, words associated with technology, tactics, and the machinery of war often spread from one army to another, eventually filtering into civilian language and persisting long after the war has ended.

Linguistic borrowing during war has often resulted in the incorporation of terms that reflect the innovations and strategies of the time. For instance, the term *blitzkrieg*, a German word meaning "lightning war," became widely known during World War II, describing the rapid, overwhelming military strategy used by Nazi Germany. It is now used in both military and civilian contexts to describe any swift and overwhelming action (Podhajecka, 2021). Similarly, the Japanese term *kamikaze*, which originally described suicide pilots during World War II, was adopted into English and is now used metaphorically to refer to reckless or self-destructive behavior (Sokpo et al., 2020).

Military conflicts not only introduce new terminology but also facilitate the spread of existing words and phrases across linguistic boundaries. For instance, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union led to the dissemination of Russian terms like *sputnik* (referring to the Soviet Union's space program) and *nyet* (meaning "no") into global discourse, illustrating how geopolitical tensions can

shape everyday language (Podhajecka, 2021). Similarly, during the Vietnam War, English borrowed the term *guerrilla* (from Spanish), which originally referred to small, independent fighting units, and is now widely used to describe unconventional warfare (Styrkina, 2022). These examples illustrate how war, as a global event, creates a fertile ground for linguistic borrowing, shaping language in ways that extend far beyond the battlefield.

Problem Statement:

Despite the significant influence of military conflicts on language development, linguistic borrowing during wartime is often overlooked in traditional studies of language evolution. While the role of trade, migration, and colonization in linguistic borrowing has been extensively studied, the impact of war on language has not received the same level of attention. This gap in the literature neglects the unique ways in which military conflicts serve as catalysts for the rapid spread and adoption of new terms and expressions. As languages come into contact during war, the urgency and necessity of communication between different linguistic groups can accelerate the process of borrowing, making conflict a key driver of lexical expansion (Li et al., 2020).

The introduction of new terms during wartime can have long-lasting effects on language. For example, during World War II, English borrowed heavily from German, Russian, and Japanese, and many of these terms have persisted in the lexicon. In contemporary times, conflicts like the War on Terror have introduced Arabic terms such as *jihad* and *fatwa* into English, demonstrating how linguistic borrowing continues to evolve in response to global conflicts (Pavlova & Guralnik, 2020). This study seeks to explore how modern military conflicts continue to shape languages by introducing new terminology and expressions that become part of everyday discourse.

Research Questions:

To address the gaps in the literature on war-related linguistic borrowing, this study poses the following research questions:

1. How do military conflicts contribute to the borrowing of new terms and expressions into languages?

2. What specific mechanisms allow for these borrowed terms to become part of everyday language, both in military and civilian contexts?

3. What are the long-term linguistic impacts of military conflicts on borrowing, and how do these terms evolve after the conflict ends?

Objective:

The primary objective of this study is to investigate how military conflicts lead to the incorporation of new military-related terminology into everyday language and to identify patterns in lexical borrowing that occur during war. By examining historical and contemporary conflicts, this study aims to illuminate the mechanisms by which new terms are adopted and adapted by both combatants and civilians, and how these terms persist in the lexicon after the conflict has ended. Furthermore, this research will highlight the socio-political factors that influence the retention or loss of borrowed terms in post-conflict language.

Historical Context and Examples:

Linguistic borrowing during wartime is not a new phenomenon. Throughout history, war has been a significant driver of language change, particularly in the form of lexical borrowing. One of the most well-known examples of this is the influence of Norman French on the English language following the Norman Conquest of 1066. As a result of this military occupation, English adopted a large number of French terms related to law, governance, and military affairs, many of which are still in use today (e.g., *court*, *jury*, *army*) (Mezhov et al., 2020).

In more recent history, World War II serves as a prime example of how conflict can introduce new terms into a language. The term *panzer* (from German) became widely known during the war to describe German tanks, while *Gestapo*, the abbreviation for the German secret police, was adopted into English as a synonym for oppressive and secretive enforcement agencies (Guilmartin, 2022). Similarly, the term *bazooka*—originally a slang term for an improvised musical instrument—became synonymous with a type of anti-tank rocket launcher used by the U.S. military during the war, and its use has since expanded to describe any powerful or heavy-duty tool (Pynnöniemi & Jokela, 2020).

In addition to borrowing from enemy languages, military conflicts also foster the borrowing of terms from allied nations. During the Cold War, English borrowed terms from Russian, such as *glasnost* and *perestroika*, which were widely used to describe the policies of openness and restructuring under Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev (Ptaszek et al., 2024). These terms, originally tied to specific political movements, have since evolved in meaning and are now used more broadly in English to describe any process of reform or openness.

2. Materials and Methods

Materials:

The materials for this study are drawn from a wide array of military-related terms that emerged during significant conflicts, including World War II, the Vietnam War, and the ongoing War on Terror. Each of these conflicts introduced new vocabulary into both military and civilian lexicons, making them ideal sources for examining linguistic borrowing. The corpus will consist of military documents, historical records, government communications, and media reporting from each conflict period, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of how military terminology entered the everyday language.

The study focuses on four primary languages: English, German, Japanese, and Arabic, chosen for their significant involvement in global military conflicts and the clear evidence of cross-linguistic borrowing. English serves as both a donor and recipient of military jargon, as it borrowed extensively during World War II and continues to incorporate terms from ongoing conflicts, particularly from the Arabic-speaking world. German, the source of several key military terms during World War II (e.g., *blitzkrieg*, *panzer*), Japanese (e.g., *kamikaze*), and Arabic, with modern terms like *jihad* and *fatwa* entering global discourse during the War on Terror, will also be integral to the analysis. By focusing on these languages, the study will be able to track how military vocabulary moves across linguistic boundaries and how these borrowed terms evolve post-conflict.

Data Collection:

Data for this study will be collected through a systematic review of historical texts, military documents, media reports, and dictionaries from the conflict periods. The primary sources for this review include archival military communications and official government documents, which provide the initial context

for the introduction of specific military terms. Media reporting from each conflict, including newspapers, radio broadcasts, and television reports, will also be analyzed to trace how military terms transitioned from official discourse to popular usage.

In addition to primary sources, secondary resources such as dictionaries, etymological databases, and linguistic studies will be consulted to track the first recorded use of borrowed terms. Etymological dictionaries, such as the Oxford English Dictionary, will be used to verify the dates when military-related words first appeared in English and other target languages. This will enable the study to trace the path of borrowed words from their initial introduction to their eventual incorporation into everyday language.

The collected data will focus not only on the terms that entered military lexicons but also on those that became widespread in civilian usage, helping to understand the broader socio-linguistic impact of conflict on language. For instance, terms like *blitzkrieg* began in military strategy but are now widely used in business and sports contexts to denote rapid, aggressive actions. This shift from specialized jargon to common speech is a key focus of the data collection process.

Methodology:

The methodology of this study is grounded in comparative linguistic analysis, which will be used to track how specific military terms entered the lexicons of different languages and evolved over time. This method involves identifying terms that were first introduced during military conflicts and examining how they were used both during and after the conflicts. The study will take a qualitative approach by closely analyzing the context in which these terms were used, both in military documents and civilian media, to explore their semantic shifts and adaptations.

The data analysis will focus on the frequency of borrowed terms in different types of texts—military, media, and civilian. For instance, terms like *kamikaze* (Japanese) or *IED* (Improvised Explosive Device, from Arabic conflicts) may have appeared initially in military reports but eventually found their way into news reports and public discussions. The analysis will identify when and how these terms moved into broader usage, and whether their meanings changed or remained consistent.

The study will apply theories of language contact, particularly borrowing and code-switching, to explain how and why certain military terms were adopted while others were not. Language contact theory posits that when speakers of different languages interact, lexical borrowing often occurs, especially in contexts where one language has prestige or offers new concepts that do not exist in the other language (Sokpo et al., 2020). In military contexts, this borrowing can be accelerated by the urgent need for communication and coordination between allies or even between combatants. The analysis will consider how socio-political factors, such as power dynamics between nations, influence which terms are borrowed and how they are assimilated into the target language.

By tracking the adoption and adaptation of military-related terminology across languages, this study will provide insights into the mechanisms of linguistic borrowing during times of conflict and explore how military jargon evolves into everyday language. The analysis will also identify any patterns in the types of terms that are most likely to be borrowed (e.g., technological terms, tactical concepts, or cultural references), contributing to a broader understanding of how language changes in response to global events.

3. Results

Findings:

The analysis of military-related linguistic borrowing reveals significant patterns in the types of terms that entered the English lexicon during major conflicts, with some terms persisting long after their military origins, while others faded from use. Several key terms, first introduced in wartime contexts, have undergone both semantic shifts and broader adoption in civilian language.

One of the most notable findings is the widespread borrowing of terms from World War II. For example, the German term *blitzkrieg* (literally "lightning war") was used to describe the fast, overwhelming tactics of the German army during the war. Initially employed in military strategy documents and reporting, *blitzkrieg* has since entered the broader lexicon, used metaphorically in business, sports, and politics to describe any rapid and forceful action. Similarly, the Japanese word *kamikaze* (divine wind), which originally referred to suicide pilots in the Pacific theater, was adopted into English during World War II. Today, *kamikaze* is often used in everyday contexts to describe reckless or self-sacrificial behavior (Sokpo et al., 2020).

The post-World War II era saw an influx of Russian military terms into English during the Cold War. Terms like *sputnik* (referring to the Soviet satellite) and *glasnost* (a policy of transparency) were not only used in political and media discussions but also began to reflect broader cultural concepts. *Sputnik* has evolved to describe any major technological breakthrough, while *glasnost* is now employed metaphorically to refer to transparency in various sectors, such as government or corporate policies (Podhajecka, 2021). These examples demonstrate how terms tied to military or political ideologies can outgrow their original contexts, taking on new meanings in civilian discourse.

In more recent conflicts, particularly the Gulf Wars and the War on Terror, Arabic terms have entered global discourse, often through the media's coverage of these conflicts. Words such as *jihad* (struggle or holy war) and *fatwa* (legal ruling or decree) were initially tied to religious and military contexts in the Middle East. However, as these terms entered English through reporting on terrorism and international conflict, they took on more generalized meanings. *Jihad* has come to symbolize any ideological struggle, while *fatwa* is used to describe any authoritative pronouncement, far removed from its religious legal roots (Ptaszek et al., 2024). This shift highlights how terms from conflicts involving cultural or religious elements are susceptible to semantic broadening when absorbed into a new linguistic environment.

Additionally, the Vietnam War introduced terms such as *guerrilla*, borrowed from Spanish, and *Charlie* (slang for the Viet Cong, derived from the NATO phonetic alphabet), both of which have maintained their military connotations but are also used metaphorically to refer to any insurgent or unconventional force (Styrkina, 2022). These terms demonstrate how language shifts not only through direct contact between nations but also through the influence of allied forces.

Tables/Figures:

The following table illustrates some of the key military terms borrowed into English during different conflicts, along with their original meanings and their current uses:

Term	Original Language	Conflict	Original Meaning	Current Use in English
Blitzkrieg	German	World War II	Lightning war, rapid military attack	Any rapid and overwhelming action (business, sports)
Kamikaze	Japanese	World War II	Suicide pilot	Reckless, self-sacrificial behavior
Sputnik	Russian	Cold War	Soviet satellite	Any major technological breakthrough
Jihad	Arabic	War on Terror	Religious struggle, holy war	Ideological or political struggle
Guerrilla	Spanish	Vietnam War	Small independent fighting force	Unconventional or insurgent group
IED	English/Arabic	Gulf War	Improvised Explosive Device	Used widely in media to describe any homemade explosive

A graph could show the rise in usage of terms like *blitzkrieg*, *kamikaze*, and *jihad* in major English-language media outlets over time, with significant spikes occurring during and after the conflicts in which the terms were introduced. This trend underscores the role of media in both spreading and entrenching these borrowed terms in everyday discourse.

Patterns:

Several recurring patterns were identified in the borrowing of military terms during wartime:

1. **Technological and Tactical Borrowing**: Terms related to military technology and tactics, such as *blitzkrieg* (tactical) or *IED* (technological), are often the first to be borrowed. These terms fill linguistic gaps when there is no existing word in the borrowing language to describe a new concept or innovation. As conflicts bring technological advancements, new terms are adopted swiftly due to necessity. The widespread adoption of *drone* (originally military, now generalized to any remotely controlled flying object) is another modern example of technological borrowing from military contexts.

2. **Cultural and Political Borrowing**: Words tied to political or ideological elements of warfare, such as *jihad* or *glasnost*, are often borrowed and adapted to fit new socio-political contexts. These terms not only retain their original meanings but also take on metaphorical uses as they become embedded in public discourse. For instance, *glasnost* originally referred to Soviet political reforms but is now used to describe any policy of transparency, illustrating how the term has transcended its Cold War context (Pynnöniemi & Jokela, 2020).

3. **Semantic Broadening and Generalization**: Many military terms experience semantic broadening once they are borrowed. For example, *kamikaze* was initially used to describe

Japanese pilots in World War II, but it has since evolved to refer to any form of reckless or self-sacrificial behavior. Similarly, *IED* (Improvised Explosive Device) began as a term to describe a specific kind of weapon used in guerrilla warfare, but it is now used more generally in media reports to refer to any homemade explosive device used in conflict zones (Styrkina, 2022).

4. **Role of Media in Dissemination**: The spread of military terms is often facilitated by media coverage, which brings the language of war into the homes of civilians. Terms like *jihad* and *IED* gained prominence through the extensive media coverage of the War on Terror, and this exposure accelerated their adoption into common language. This pattern highlights how globalization and media, particularly in the digital age, expedite the process of linguistic borrowing (Mezhov et al., 2020).

Long-Term Impact of Borrowing:

Another key finding is the varying longevity of borrowed military terms in English. Some terms, such as *blitzkrieg* and *jihad*, have maintained their presence in both military and non-military contexts, demonstrating their semantic adaptability and cultural relevance. Others, however, such as *sputnik*, while influential during their respective conflict periods, have faded somewhat from mainstream usage, becoming more associated with historical events rather than present-day discourse.

Additionally, the study found that the borrowing process differs depending on the cultural and political relationships between the warring nations. English, as a dominant global language, tends to borrow terms from both allies and adversaries, but how those terms are integrated depends on the cultural weight of the source language. For instance, German terms from World War II entered English more rapidly due to the intensity and global nature of the conflict, while Arabic terms from the War on Terror have been more selectively adopted due to cultural and religious nuances that impact their usage in non-military contexts.

4. Discussion

Interpretation:

The findings underscore the profound relationship between military conflict and linguistic evolution, wherein war becomes not merely a catalyst for social and political upheaval, but also a mechanism through which language is fundamentally altered. Linguistic borrowing during wartime is an inevitable byproduct of intense cross-cultural contact, necessitated by the urgency of communication between diverse groups—combatants, allies, and civilians. The proliferation of military terms from one language to another is facilitated not just by direct interaction, but by the exponential reach of mass media and globalization, which amplifies and accelerates the spread of these terms far beyond the battlefield.

The term *IED* (Improvised Explosive Device), for example, which rose to prominence during the Iraq War, demonstrates the intersection between linguistic necessity and socio-political urgency. In the absence of a pre-existing term that encapsulated the specific and novel nature of these homemade explosives, *IED* entered global discourse, transcending its military origins to signify any rudimentary explosive device used in asymmetric warfare (Sokpo et al., 2020). This borrowing reflects not just a linguistic adaptation, but a broader socio-political shift in how modern conflicts are understood and communicated. Such terms, though born out of necessity, carry with them the weight of the historical moment, embedding themselves in the lexicon as cultural markers of an era.

Furthermore, these borrowings often reflect the underlying power dynamics of the conflict itself. Language, in this context, serves as a mirror to the asymmetries of war—terms from dominant powers or technologically superior forces are more likely to be borrowed, while the languages of subjugated or less technologically advanced groups may contribute terms that reflect their position in the conflict, often associated with guerrilla tactics or resistance movements. The dissemination of terms like *kamikaze* (Japanese) during World War II or *jihad* (Arabic) in the context of the War on Terror exemplifies how linguistic borrowing is intertwined with the socio-political realities of conflict.

Comparison with Previous Studies:

In examining the linguistic consequences of military conflict, it becomes clear that war, much like colonialism, offers a unique context for borrowing. However, unlike colonial encounters—where linguistic borrowing is often gradual and mediated by long-term contact—war demands immediacy. The urgency of wartime borrowing is driven by necessity: new terms must quickly fill the gaps in communication caused by rapidly changing technologies, strategies, and geopolitical realities. As Li et al. (2020) point out, borrowing during periods of cultural contact like colonialism is often facilitated by power imbalances, wherein the colonizer's language dominates and subsumes the language of the colonized. In contrast, military borrowing tends to be more fluid, involving terms that serve practical, immediate functions, whether technical or tactical.

This rapid adoption can be observed in the Vietnam War, where terms like *guerrilla* and *Charlie* entered the English lexicon almost in real-time, as soldiers and media commentators needed precise, easily communicable language to describe the unique dynamics of the conflict. These terms, borrowed from Spanish and military jargon, were disseminated globally through media coverage, embedding themselves in both military and civilian discourse. Similarly, during the Gulf Wars, Arabic terms such as *fatwa* and *jihad* gained prominence, reflecting not only the religious and ideological dimensions of the conflict but also how language itself becomes a tool for framing the narrative of war (Ptaszek et al., 2024).

Challenges:

Despite these clear patterns, the study of wartime linguistic borrowing presents several methodological challenges. One of the most pressing is determining the exact origin and first use of borrowed terms, particularly in modern contexts where the media rapidly disseminates language across borders. The term *IED*, for example, became ubiquitous in global discourse almost immediately after it was coined, making it difficult to trace its exact origins with precision. The speed at which terms are adopted and adapted during wartime—often due to the heightened flow of information—complicates traditional methods of etymological research, which rely on more gradual processes of linguistic diffusion (Podhajecka, 2021).

Another challenge lies in distinguishing between temporary and permanent borrowings. Military slang, in particular, may see widespread use during a conflict but fade into obscurity once the war ends. Terms like *grunt* (used to describe infantrymen during the Vietnam War) were once pervasive but have since become relegated to historical or subcultural usage. Conversely, terms like *blitzkrieg* or *kamikaze* have experienced semantic broadening, becoming metaphorical descriptors for non-military situations. The challenge, therefore, is to determine which terms will persist and which will be confined to the annals of wartime lexicon.

Implications:

The implications of these findings are significant, not just for linguistics but for our understanding of how military conflicts shape culture, politics, and identity. Language, as a repository of human experience, captures the essence of conflict in ways that historical and political accounts may not. Borrowed military terms often become deeply embedded in civilian discourse, shaping how we think about and discuss war, conflict, and even everyday situations.

For instance, the term *blitzkrieg*, once a strictly military concept, is now used in business and sports to describe any rapid, overwhelming action. This transformation highlights how language borrows the symbolic power of wartime terms to articulate experiences far removed from the battlefield. Similarly, the term *jihad*, which has religious and ideological connotations in Arabic, has been co-opted by Western media to describe any form of extremist violence, reflecting not only linguistic borrowing but also the geopolitical tensions that shape how terms are framed and understood in different cultures (Styrkina, 2022). Understanding these borrowings provides valuable insights into the socio-political context of post-war periods, where language serves as a record of the conflict's lasting impact.

Moreover, the spread of military terminology into civilian life underscores the extent to which war influences not just the languages we speak but also the ways in which we perceive and engage with the world. Words borrowed during wartime often carry with them the emotional and psychological weight of the conflict, influencing how future generations conceptualize warfare, resistance, and power. Thus, the study of linguistic borrowing during military conflicts offers a unique lens through which to examine the enduring legacies of war, not just on the battlefield but in the everyday language we use to make sense of our world.

Limitations:

While this study provides a comprehensive analysis of military-related linguistic borrowing, several limitations should be acknowledged. The focus on conflicts involving major world powers—such as World War II, the Vietnam War, and the War on Terror—means that smaller regional conflicts, which may have also contributed to linguistic borrowing, are underrepresented. Additionally, the study primarily examines terms that have entered English, German, Japanese, and Arabic. As a result, borrowings from languages outside this set, particularly those of indigenous or less globally prominent nations, may be overlooked.

Future research should aim to include a broader range of conflicts and languages, particularly those from smaller or non-Western regions, to fully understand the global dynamics of linguistic borrowing during wartime. Furthermore, while this study emphasizes the role of military borrowing in shaping language, the interplay between military terminology and other forms of cultural exchange during war—such as art, literature, and propaganda—remains an area ripe for exploration.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that military conflicts are not only sources of socio-political change but also major catalysts for linguistic borrowing. Wars, with their rapid technological innovations, complex strategies, and cultural clashes, introduce specialized terminology that often transcends the battlefield and becomes woven into the everyday lexicon. Terms like *blitzkrieg* (originally describing a fast-paced German military strategy during World War II) and *IED* (Improvised Explosive Device, popularized

during the Iraq War) exemplify how words initially tied to military operations evolve to describe metaphorical or broader societal phenomena. These terms, alongside many others, have extended beyond their original martial contexts to become fixtures in politics, business, and everyday life. As evidenced throughout the analysis, media and globalization play pivotal roles in this process, ensuring that borrowed military terms quickly permeate civilian language across cultures and geographic boundaries.

The research enriches the field of linguistic borrowing by offering a focused examination of how wartime conditions accelerate the spread of military-specific terminology. Unlike peacetime linguistic borrowing, which may occur gradually through trade, migration, or cultural exchange, wartime borrowing is driven by necessity and urgency. This study further contributes by emphasizing the role of mass media, particularly in the 20th and 21st centuries, in transmitting military jargon from the battlefield to the broader public. Globalization, facilitated by the reach of international news agencies, has allowed terms like *jihad* or *drone* to be rapidly adopted into languages far removed from the immediate conflict zones. The study, by drawing attention to the mechanisms behind this linguistic phenomenon, opens new discussions about how military discourse shapes not only political narratives but also everyday language.

There remain vast opportunities for future research in this domain. One promising avenue is the exploration of how linguistic borrowing during military conflicts affects languages not directly involved in the wars but exposed to military terms through global media. For instance, how do non-Western languages, particularly those in neutral or non-combatant nations, assimilate military terminology disseminated via international news outlets? Additionally, there is a pressing need for a deeper analysis of the linguistic impact of non-Western conflicts. Much of the existing research focuses on Western powers, yet conflicts in regions such as Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America may offer rich insights into alternative patterns of linguistic borrowing. Investigating these contexts could reveal new dynamics in how language evolves in response to war, offering a more comprehensive view of the intersection between conflict and language development.

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