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# Language Use in Totalistic Social Groups

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper explores how the totalistic social structure of the United States military is influenced by language use. More specifically, within this paper I will discuss how language contributes to the creation of a newfound identity among military members and how this identity influences the totalistic social structure of the group. I will also elaborate on how linguistic politeness is conveyed within the US military and how linguistic politeness influences the totalistic and hierarchical social structure of the military. Current literature and research regarding language in totalistic groups is limited. Research exploring how language practices used in totalistic groups influence the social structure of those groups is even more limited. Although there is current literature regarding language use in the US military, such as the work of Halbe (2011) and Potter (2013) which will both be discussed later in this paper, this literature does not directly answer the question of how language use in the military impacts the totalistic social structure of the military. Therefore, this project provides much needed data and analysis to a currently limited area of linguistic research. Throughout this paper, I will be discussing how daily language practices used by members of the US military influence the social structure of the military; a social structure characterized by a rigid hierarchy (Martins and Lopes 2012) and a totalistic environment. Ultimately, this project proposes that language is used in various ways by military members to maintain and strengthen the totalistic social structure of the US military.

This paper is organized as follows: The second section of this paper will explore characteristics of totalistic social groups and why the US military is considered to be totalistic. Section three will discuss how I collected my data for this project via an online anonymous survey. Section four will explore how language use in the US military influences the way in which members of the military identify. Within this fourth section of the paper I will also analyze these language-inspired identities as directly strengthening the US military's totalistic social structure. The fifth section of this paper will discuss how linguistic politeness is conveyed within the US military. Ultimately, this fifth section will explore how polite language use in the military strengthens the totalistic social structure of the group. The sixth and final section of this paper will include a summary, a discussion of the implications of this project, and a look into issues for further research regarding the topic of language in totalistic social groups.

## **2. Characteristics of Totalistic Social Groups**

Before diving into the topic of language use in totalistic social groups, it is important to understand how totalistic groups are defined and characterized. Lifton (1969) defines totalistic groups as collections of individuals who share similar goals and values and who live together under intensive and restrictive social, and often physical, boundaries enforced by the group's members and/or leadership. The United States military is a totalistic group in that within the military there are clear and strict rules for behavior, members share similar values and goals (such as prioritizing national safety and advancing American interests), daily life and duties are heavily regulated and consistently scheduled, high demands are placed upon members, and

groups members often live within close physical and social proximity to one another (limiting their daily contact with non-members). Totalistic groups, like the US military, are also often characterized as having a group specific language only spoken by members (Lifton 1969). Within the US military for example, jargon, group-specific rules for linguistic politeness, terms of address, and the commonality of nicknames act as representations of a group-exclusive language used by members of the military. Totalistic groups also include members who engage in similar daily tasks and experience similar situations that distinguish them from non-group members (Lifton 1969). However, the ultimate distinguishing factor of a severely totalistic group, and one that is true for the US military, is the fact that the group provides a complete way of life which allows members to never have to leave the group in order to satisfy basic human needs (Lifton 1969). Since the US military depends more on social cohesion and members adhering to group expectations than most other social groups (King 2006), the US military is a clear example of a totalistic group that survives and thrives by demanding the conformity of all members to group rules.

### **3. Methodology**

For this research project, I created and distributed an online anonymous survey via Qualtrics at the University of Montana (see Appendix). This survey included thirty-seven questions asking respondents to indicate how language is used on a daily basis within the US military. The data collected from this survey comes from survey respondents who indicated that they are currently or were at one time a member of the US military. In total, I received fourteen responses to this survey. The results of this survey provide a look into how language is used on a daily basis within the US military and how members of the military may feel towards these language practices. The majority of my paper draws from this survey.

### **4. Identity**

#### **4.1 Background: Social Identity Theory & Social Categorization**

In this section I utilize the frameworks of two sociological concepts and apply these frameworks to my survey data in order to discuss the role that language plays in the identities of totalistic group members. The sociological concepts that are discussed in this section are the social identity theory and the process of social categorization (Higgins, Kruglanski, and Van Lange 2011). Both of these concepts are reflected within my survey data and have contributed to my analyses of this data. In this section I provide examples of language use within the US military that furthers our understanding on how identity is influenced by the totalistic environment of the military and in turn, how identity strengthens the social structure of the US military.

The social identity theory is defined as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership” (Higgins, Kruglanski, and Van Lange 2011: 380). To understand the social identity theory, it is important to understand the motivation behind this theory. Higgins, Kruglanski, and Van Lange (2011) state that the social identity theory allows for society to better understand how and why individuals come to express themselves by means of a social/group identity rather than an individualistic/personal identity in

certain social environments. I propose that the social identity theory is reflected by language use in the US military. More specifically, I suggest that the group specific language practices used by military members allow for new and group centered identities among group members to be created.

In addition to the social identity theory, this section connects the process of social categorization to language practices found within the US military in order to shed light on how individualism and identity is represented within the US military, and ultimately within totalistic social groups. Social categorization refers to the process in which individuals are placed within close physical and emotional proximity to one another within a group setting and eventually begin to see themselves as distinguished from non-group members (Higgins, Kruglanski, and Van Lange 2011). After analyzing my survey data and the relevant literature, I propose that social categorization is an invaluable social process used by the US military, and totalistic groups in general, to create a new sense of identity within members that is group oriented rather than individualistically oriented.

#### 4.2 Jargon & Identity

My survey data indicates that the US military generates a social environment in which using group jargon on a daily basis is necessary. For example, jargon words described in my data, such as, *ruck*, *smoke*, and *roger* define military specific equipment, military specific situations, or expected means of communication within the military. More specifically, *ruck* refers to what non-members of the military would call a *backpack* that is filled with heavy objects and carried for long periods of time. In this way, *ruck* is a military specific jargon word for a piece of equipment. To get *smoked* is another jargon term in my data. Getting *smoked* refers to a military member engaging in physical activity as a punishment. Thus, *smoked* is a jargon term for a specific situation in the military. *Roger* refers to one member of the military affirming that he/she comprehends what another member has said. *Roger* therefore, is a military specific jargon term that is used in daily communication among members of the group. *Ruck*, *smoked*, and *roger* are three examples of jargon terms frequently used by members of the US military, however, as my survey indicates, there are countless other military specific jargon terms that are used by members on a consistent basis. More specifically, my survey data suggests that military members use group specific language often and that each piece of military equipment and vehicle has a military specific acronym, nomenclature, or nickname. For example, my survey data reveals that *Humvee* is a military jargon term for many of the lightweight trucks used within the US military.

My survey data reveals that members of the US military must be aware of the jargon used within the military and must use this jargon on a daily basis to be competent members of the group. I suggest that if a military member does not know the proper jargon term to use when referring to a piece of equipment, such as a *ruck*, that member is put at risk for not being able to complete daily tasks within the military. In addition, if a member of the military is unaware of the proper jargon term for a specific situation, such as the situation of getting *smoked*, that military member will not be able to effectively communicate with other members. Finally, if a US military member does not use military specific jargon in a potentially dangerous environment, such as member not knowing what a *Humvee* is when given sudden orders to drive the vehicle in a dangerous situation, that military member may be putting themselves and other members at risk. Ultimately, my survey data demonstrates that using military jargon is a

necessity for members of the military to (1) complete daily tasks in the group (2) communicate effectively with other members (3) remain safe in dangerous military environments.

I propose that since military jargon appears to be necessary to lead a successful life as a member within the group, jargon contributes to creating a group-oriented identity among US military members. This group-oriented identity forms due to the fact that members must, and do; use group jargon on a daily basis. By doing so, members are speaking the exclusive language of the military and are consistently reminded of their reliance on and attachment to the group. In this way, the social structure of the US military is strengthened because (1) members learn the necessity of conforming to group rules and (2) boundaries between group members and non-members are highlighted. Both of these results of jargon use lead to members considering themselves to be a significant part of an exclusive group. In addition, these two outcomes of jargon use foster a new sense of identity among members that is built around being a member of the group. I also propose that the military's attribution of group speech to group survival, and the consistent jargon use required by military members, suggests how important it is to the military's social stability that soldiers identify as members of the group first, and as individuals second. By creating an environment in which group (and member) survival and success depends on group identity instead of individualism, the US military succeeds in pressuring members to use group specific language and therefore, maintains and strengthens the totalistic structure of the group. In sum, I suggest that the jargon specific to the US military creates a strong sense of reliance on and belonging to the group among group members. This sense of belonging creates a group-oriented identity among members that is characterized by the social identity theory and heavily marked by each individual's membership to the US military. Therefore, jargon within the military leads members of the group to self-identity as members of the US military. Ultimately, since military jargon is specific to members of the group and not to outsiders, I propose that jargon use in the military formulates a new sense of identity among members that represents each member's affiliation with the group more so than with individualistic characteristics.

#### 4.3 Terms of Address & Identity

In this section, I extend the concept of social categorization to the US military by claiming that language use within the military separates members of the military from non-members. Current research states that members of totalistic groups are often restricted access to non-members and are consistently reminded of the differences and boundaries between group members and non-members (Lifton 1969). I propose that language is used within totalistic groups, in this case the US military, to create an environment of social categorization and therefore, to strengthen in-group identity and mentality. More specifically, my survey data suggests that the act of one member referring to another member of the US military by military rank is widespread and expected throughout the group. For example, respondents to my survey indicated that they often referred to military superiors with the term of address *sir/ma'am* or by the rank of that superior (depending on the rank of the superior and context). My survey data also implies that military members who fail to use the proper term of address when speaking to a superior will face punishment. For example, one survey respondent stated that if a military member calls a Sergeant *sir/ma'am*, instead of *Sergeant*, that military member will face retributive consequences. In addition, my survey data suggests that the most common way in which superior members of the military refer to subordinates is by rank of the subordinate.

Therefore, my survey data indicates that the act of one military member referring to another by a term of address that is military-oriented, including rank, *sir/ma'am*, etc. appears to be the most common way in which military members refer to fellow members. I suggest that the act of referring to another member by rank is engrained within group members by group leadership in order to ensure that group members are aware of their social position within the group and of the fact that they belong to a unified and exclusive community. In this way, I view the act of one US military member calling another member by rank as the encouragement of members to identify with their rank. By considering individual military rank as a marker of individual identity, I propose that members of the military gain a newfound identity that is characterized by an individual's membership to the US military. Therefore, the process of social categorization is apparent within the US military and by means of language use social categorization contributes to the formation of group-characterized identities among members of the military. These newfound group-characterized identities found within military members create dedicated members with strong attachments to the group who conform to group expectations and loyally follow military authority and orders.

#### 4.4 Nicknames

To conclude this section, I briefly discuss the use of nicknames in the US military. The results of my survey support the claims of Potter (2013) and Chaloupsky (2005), which argue that nicknames stand as another identification marker found within the US military. Current literature suggests that nicknames are integral to daily military life (Potter 2013) and that nicknames create a sense of identity and solidarity among military members (Chaloupsky 2005). Literature on the topic of nicknames in the military also reflects the fact that nicknames are a widespread phenomenon throughout the US military (Chaloupsky 2005). Furthermore, research conducted by Potter (2013) suggests that nicknames within the US military act as a significant way for military members to form social bonds with other members. Due to my small sample size, I am not able to make broad generalizations about nicknames within the US military. However, by drawing on current literature and the consistency of nickname use in the military indicated by my survey respondents, I propose a correlation between nicknames in the military and member identity. Using the framework of the social identity theory and drawing from the work of Potter and Chaloupsky, I propose that nicknames in the military, and in totalistic groups, strengthen in-group bonds between members and provide a new sense of identity for members that is characterized by belonging to the group. Therefore, I view the formation of a group specific identity among members of the US military to be continuously strengthened and maintained by the assignment of nicknames to military members. I suggest that not only do nicknames remind members of their connection with the group and its members, but nicknames also act as a way to reinforce the totalistic social structure of the US military. By strengthening friendship bonds between members and implying sharp boundaries between members and non-members (since a military specific nickname may not be used/used as often outside of the group by non-members), nicknames act as a powerful tool for strengthening the totalistic social structure of the US military.

## 5. Influence of Polite Language

### 5.1 Background: Previous Research on Linguistic Politeness

In this section, I analyze my survey data within the linguistic framework of politeness created by Brown and Levinson (1987) and support these analyses with data collected by Halbe (2011) and Potter (2013). By doing so, I connect the broader concepts of language and politeness found in the relevant literature to the specific totalistic group of the US military. As it pertains to this project, what is currently known about linguistic politeness as a general concept will be drawn from the work of Brown and Levinson (1978). More specifically, Brown and Levinson claim that communities throughout the world use linguistic politeness strategies to strengthen personal relationships, reinforce social distance, maintain power/influence over others, and emphasize in-group membership and sense of belonging. I provide examples of linguistic politeness in the US military, as found in my data, in order to illustrate how Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness applies to language practices in the military and how these language practices influence the social structure of the military.

Brown and Levinson's model of politeness suggests that all competent adults within society have 'face', a term referring to the public self-image that every member of society wants to claim for themselves. Face presents itself in two ways, positive face and negative face, with positive face referring to a one's desire to feel appreciated, liked, and accepted by others, and negative face referring to one's desire to be free from imposition from others and to have freedom of action (Brown and Levinson 1987). In addition, Brown and Levinson suggest that face is emotionally invested, can be sustained, lost, or augmented, and must be consistently taken into account during interpersonal interactions. In connection with politeness, how an individual wishes to influence face, either for themselves or others, is determined by their use of the two forms of politeness within Brown and Levinson's model: positive or negative politeness (Brown 2015). Positive politeness refers to a speaker's attempt to satisfy the positive face of the hearer, and ultimately attempting to make the hearer feel appreciated and/or included. In contrast, negative politeness refers to a speaker's attempt to satisfy the negative face of the hearer, therefore, negative politeness is fundamentally avoidance based and centers around the speaker recognizing and respecting the hearer's desire to not have their freedom of action impeded on. My project explores how certain language practices (as found in my survey data) are used between US military members to represent positive politeness and how these practices influence the social structure of the US military as a whole.

Halbe (2011) examines linguistic politeness strategies used by military members within a US Army Battalion. Halbe concludes that (1) the social hierarchy of the US military is reflected by the use of politeness strategies among members, (2) positive and negative face are both readily apparent within the US military in order to achieve certain outcomes, and (3) polite language behavior varies greatly between militaristic situations and ranks. In addition, Halbe uses Brown and Levinson's model of politeness and suggests that positive politeness is most commonly used in interactions between military members of the same military rank, while negative politeness is most commonly used in interactions between members of different ranks. Therefore, Halbe's work successfully applies Brown and Levinson's model of politeness to the US military. The analysis of my survey results support Halbe's claims, revealing how linguistic positive politeness influences the social structure of the US military.

This project also draws on the work of Potter (2013), who analyzed the use of nicknames among military cadets at West Point Academy. Potter concludes that there are patterns in the ways which nicknames are created and distributed between cadets at West Point. More specifically, Potter suggests that nicknames are most commonly created and used between military members of the same military rank. In this way, nicknames are far more commonly used between military members of similar status in the group than between members of different social status. In adherence to Halbe's claim, Potter suggests that the hierarchical social structure of the US military is reflected in the way that West Point cadets use nicknames. Due to the fact that nicknames are most commonly used between members of the same rank at West Point, the practice of members using nicknames represents the social differences in status and rank that exist within the military. Finally, Potter implies that nicknames within the US military, West Point in particular, act as a way for members of similar status to bond together and form strong social relationships. In the remainder of this section I show that, based on the analysis of my survey data, linguistic positive politeness, in various ways, is consistently used within the US military in order to uphold and strengthen the totalistic social structure of the US military.

## 5.2 Survey Data & Linguistic Analysis

Using Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness I analyze the data collected from my survey, exploring common instances of linguistic positive politeness within the US military. In addition, my survey data suggests that US military members use different positive politeness strategies depending on context. Such contexts could include using certain politeness strategies based on whom a member in the military is addressing/talking to, the stress level of the situation/context, and the level of casualty found within a particular member's military team/unit/squad/etc. More specifically, my survey data suggests that different applications of positive politeness are used by military members depending on factors such as the ranks of individuals involved in an interaction or if an interaction takes place during basic training versus field training. My analysis focuses primarily on positive politeness use in the US military. In this section I identify and analyze four types of positive politeness commonly used by members in the US military that emerged in the participant responses to my survey. These four types of positive politeness include (1) members referring to superiors by specific address terms (2) members referring to subordinates by specific address terms (3) members using military specific jargon on a daily basis and (4) members providing other members with nicknames/members calling other members by nicknames.

### *5.2.1 Terms of Address-Subordinates to Superiors*

The first type of positive politeness refers to military members utilizing specific terms of address for superiors depending the contextual environment of the interaction itself. For instance, if a subordinate addresses a superior in a physical training or basic training environment, the interaction may be marked by a different representation of positive politeness than if that subordinate addresses the same superior in a field-training environment or a day-to-day interaction outside of training. Survey respondents indicated that within military training environments, military courtesies when addressing a superior, such as referring to a superior by rank and/or rank and last name as well as *sir* or *ma'am* is consistently expected of members. If a subordinate military member referred to a superior by use of a non-polite address within a



basic/physical training environment, that subordinate may be considered to be acting impolitely and therefore may be disciplined and/or may fall out of favor with his superiors and fellow peers. I argue that members of the military use the expected terms of address for superiors within training environments in order to project positive politeness and save their own positive face.

By conveying group-expected positive politeness in terms of address for superiors in a training environment, subordinates imply that military superiors are a necessary part of the group and that military superiors are deserving of respect. I argue that by teaching subordinates to refer to superiors with more formal terms of address in training environments, the US military conditions its members to recognize and verbally confirm the authority of leadership as well as the social hierarchy of the group and in this way, group leadership and the group's social structure is strengthened. Although some military members may often address superiors in a more casual manner once outside of a training environment, I argue that the US military teaches members the expected polite behavior in training environments in order to engrain within new members and reiterate to current members the social expectations of being a group member. By doing so, the military teaches members that they should be consistently aware of their rank/status within the group, the daily structure that the group provides, their reliance on leadership authority for guidance and direction, the clear differences between members of the group and non-members, and their association with members of their same rank who are required to refer to superiors in a consistently similar manner.

In relation to training environments, it should be noted that the exception to the US military rule that subordinates refer to superiors by rank within training environments occurs within field training environments and exercises; exercises that attempt to mimic combat situations (nmu.edu). One respondent to my survey indicated that military salutes, standing at attention, or any other linguistic or nonverbal behavior that may indicate the rank of a fellow military member is prohibited during field training exercises as to ensure safety for higher ranking members from potential enemy onlookers. In addition to the exception of training environments, Halbe (2011) suggests that politeness varies between militaristic situations. For instance, combat environments place incredible stress upon soldiers and therefore, using the group's expected polite language is not considered to be a necessity as it would be in basic training (Halbe 2011). Within my survey responses, I have uncovered similar findings to Halbe's claim that the use of polite language in the US military depends upon context. More specifically, my survey data indicates that members of the US military are instructed not to convey positive politeness via calling a fellow member by rank within field training exercises as to ensure the safety of higher-ranking members. The US military encourages members to use linguistic positive politeness in direct relation to context and ensures that members are aware of when certain polite behavior should be used and when it should be ignored for the safety and success of the group as a whole. I contend that, in this way, the US military strengthens its totalistic social structure by providing specific rules for members to adhere to in terms of positive politeness in order to create a community of team players who emphasize the values of the group: safety, respect for authority, conformity to group rules, and placing higher value on the group itself over the individual.

### *5.2.2. Terms of Address-Superiors to Subordinates*

The second type of positive politeness within the US military that I found in my survey data involves superior military members referring to subordinate members by rank. Respondents

to my survey indicated that the most common way in which superiors address subordinates, both when a superior addresses a subordinate individually and when a superior addresses a group of subordinates, is by rank. Therefore, the commonplace interaction, especially in training environments, between a subordinate and a superior involves that superior (intentionally or unintentionally) reminding the subordinate of their rank within the group and of their deep connection and association to the group. Although it may not seem polite in the general sense of the word, I argue that military superiors are conveying linguistic positive politeness when referring to subordinates within the US military by rank. More specifically, I suggest that military superiors refer to subordinates by rank in order to enforce among subordinate members that they (subordinates) are accepted by their superiors as legitimate members of an important and exclusive group that they should feel connected to, proud of, and loyal to.

I propose that this connection, pride, and loyalty generated among members by the positively polite act of superiors addressing subordinates by rank strengthens the totalistic social structure of the group as a whole. Since members are consistently reminded of their belonging in the group (via the act of superiors referring to subordinates by rank), I suggest that military members identify as members of the group and become strongly aware and attached to their social status in the group and to the group as a whole. By feeling included as a member of an elite and tight-knit group through exposure to positive politeness from superiors, I suggest that members feel emotionally tied to the group while also gaining a strong sense of loyalty to the group. This strong loyalty among military members, contributed to by positively polite language, leads to devoted members who prioritize group needs over individual needs. Ultimately, I propose that this prioritization of group needs over individual needs strengthens the totalistic social structure of the group by (1) ensuring that the military functions as efficiently as possible under the group's social structure and (2) creating an environment in which loyal members adhere to and admire the hierarchical and totalistic social environment of the group as a whole.

### 5.2.3. Jargon

The third type of positive politeness found in my survey data refers to US military members using military specific jargon on a daily basis. Jargon is defined as the technical terminology of particular group (merriam-webster.com) and is referred to as jargon and/or military specific language in this section. Analysis of my survey data suggests that the use of jargon by members within the military is necessary for members to carry out orders, understand their environment (both social and physical), and speak intelligibly with other military members. Consistently using military jargon also seems to be an act that is necessary for individual and group safety (see section 4.2 above). Furthermore, my data reveals that there are countless jargon words used within the US military, each of which serves a purpose, whether that purpose is to create closer bonds between members or to indicate which vehicle is to be used for a task. For example, one respondent indicated the five most common words within the US military as: (1) *Roger* (affirmative comprehension of what someone said), (2) *Fuck*, (3) *Humvee* (a type of vehicle), (4) *Smoke* (punishment through physical pain) and (5) *Ruck* (a backpack filled with heavy objects carried for long distances). Although one of these common words is profanity, the four other most commonly used words are jargon words.

To elaborate on one example of jargon in the military mentioned above, the military specific word *ruck* is referred to as *backpack* in environments outside of the US military. The word *ruck* is taught to military members by leadership once they enter the group and in this way,

group leadership informs members to utilize group jargon instead of familiar civilian terminology. My survey responses also indicate that, in addition to the word *ruck*, US military members are taught by the group to use jargon terms for most, if not every, piece of equipment used in the military. Since my survey data reveals that jargon is a part of daily life in the US military, it is clear that a member of the military failing to consistently use jargon would face difficulty in communicating with peers and understanding tasks/orders. Thus, by teaching members the expected jargon of the military, and reinforcing that expectation by means of jargon, I argue that military leadership creates an exclusive environment in which members must use group specific language to communicate effectively with one another, complete tasks, and maintain individual and group safety. In this way, linguistic homogeneity between members is created and allows for members to quickly form interpersonal bonds, considering the fact that they now must share a unique language in order to be competent members of the group.

As jargon pertains to positive politeness, I propose that military members actively choose to use expected group jargon in order to be mutually intelligible with other members and therefore to fit into group norms and be accepted/make others feel accepted by the group. By constantly using jargon as a means of positive politeness, US military members strengthen the social structure of the group by reinforcing the notion that members not only live in a different environment from non-members, but that members speak a language unique to the group. This group specific language ultimately informs members of their strong attachments and reliance on the group that is necessary to be successful members. By highlighting (1) the differences between members and non-members, (2) member reliance on group rules and traditions, and (3) personal bonds between members, jargon as a form of positive politeness strengthens the totalistic social structure of the military. I propose that each of the three factors mentioned above are influenced by jargon use as a form of positive politeness and contribute to the formation of deeply attached and loyal group members who work to uphold the goals and values of the US military. In this way, jargon contributes to the social structure of the military by creating and maintaining devoted and group-focused members who adhere to group hierarchy and work together to advance the goals of the military. By doing so, members of the military reinforce the legitimacy of the totalistic social structure of the group and thereby strengthen the totalistic social structure of the group as a whole.

#### *5.2.4. Nicknames*

The final example of positive politeness within the US military refers to the use of nicknames (see also Section 4.4 above). Potter (2013) researched the use of nicknames between cadets at West Point Military Academy and suggests that there are linguistic patterns found among why and how military members give one another nicknames. For instance, nicknames are most commonly used between members of the military who are of the same rank (Potter 2013). Nickname use is also most common between members of the same military subgroup, such as a platoon, company, or squadron of soldiers (Potter 2013). In addition, Potter (2013) and Chaloupsky (2005) suggest that in the US military, it is common for members to receive nicknames from fellow members and that most members positively regard the experience of having a nickname in the military. My survey data reflects the commonality of nicknames in the military stated by Potter and Chaloupsky in that more respondents to my survey indicated that they received a nickname than those who did not receive a nickname during their time in the US military.

I propose that a speaker referring to a hearer by a nickname is a form of positive politeness in that the speaker is making an effort to imply that the hearer is accepted by and socially connected to the speaker. More specifically, I argue that nicknames in the military act as a way to create strong social bonds between members because nicknames appear to be a form of positive politeness that allows for military members to feel accepted by the group. In relation to the social structure of the military, the act of members giving and receiving nicknames reflects the hierarchical social structure of the military in that members typically only use nicknames with members of similar military rank (Potter 2013). My data analysis suggests that a subordinate military member would typically not refer directly to a superior by a nickname, if they had one, out of respect and understanding for the social hierarchy. Therefore, I propose that nicknames (1) act as a way for military members of similar rank to connect and bond with one another and (2) separate superiors from subordinates by means of politeness in order to remind members of the hierarchical structure within the totalistic environment of the military. By socially bonding members together, nicknames lead to group members becoming deeply attached to other members, which in turn leads to strong attachments to the group itself. I also argue that deeply attached members of the US military, by means of nicknames, engage in behavior that prioritizes group needs over individual needs, which ultimately strengthens the totalistic social structure of the group. In addition, nicknames remind military members of the social hierarchy that is apparent within the group. Since nicknames are a linguistic practice typically reserved for interactions between members of the same rank in the group, nicknames remind members of their social status in the group, the fact that linguistic expectations vary between social statuses in the group, and of the obvious hierarchy of the group. By reminding members of the hierarchical social environment of the group and that members must adhere to this hierarchy, nicknames reinforce the legitimacy of group organization and leadership; both of which strengthen the totalistic social structure of the US military.

### 5.3 Final Thoughts on Politeness

Current literature as well as my survey data demonstrate that linguistic politeness within the US military is a complex and intricate phenomenon. This complexity is apparent through the fact that politeness within the military simultaneously parallels uses of politeness in the outside world while also distinctly setting the military apart from all other communities. More specifically, my survey data indicates that within the US military, a subordinate is socially expected to use linguistic politeness when addressing a superior. This occurrence of a member of a lower social status using polite language to communicate with a member of higher social status is not specific to the US military and in fact, is found throughout workplaces in the United States (Halbe 2011). For instance, many employees likely use positive politeness when asking a boss for a promotion. By using positive politeness in this employee/boss interaction, the employee is making the boss feel liked and appreciated in order to persuade that boss to give that employee a promotion. In this way, polite language behavior within the US military is similar to the use of politeness in the outside world.

In contrast, one way that the US military distinguishes itself from the outside world in terms of polite language behavior is by teaching, expecting, and enforcing certain polite linguistic behaviors considered unusual in broader American society. For example, the strong preference for the use of directives such as, *I need you to do this for me* is apparent, and is in fact popular, within the military, however, this form of the “I need you to...” directive is considered

to be uncommon in general American English (Halbe 2011). Perhaps this directive is less common in American civilian life because this form of a directive may come across as harsh in daily life. However, such a “harsh” directive may be necessary within certain militaristic situations, such as dangerous high stress situations. Or perhaps, the use of the “I need you to...” directive may simply be acceptable in various military situations due to the unique social setting of the US military. Although the US military shares similarities of politeness with non-totalistic environments, it is ultimately the notion that military members utilize politeness in order to, either knowingly or not, strengthen member bonds, reinforce the group’s power structure, and imply group exclusivity, that sets the US military apart in terms of linguistic politeness.

## **Section 6. Conclusions**

### 6.1 Summary

This research project sheds light on specific linguistic practices used by members of the United States military that strengthen the totalistic social structure of the military. Throughout this paper, I have discussed how members of the US military convey linguistic politeness and how language practices within the US military impact the identities of military members. In terms of politeness, this research project proposes that Brown and Levinson’s (1987) model of politeness can be successfully applied to language practices within the US military. In fact, the four types of positive politeness discovered within my survey and presented in this paper reflect Brown and Levinson’s politeness model. The presence of linguistic positive politeness strategies within this research paper suggests that polite language is widespread throughout the US military. Ultimately, this reoccurring theme of linguistic politeness within the US military strengthens the totalistic social structure of the group as a whole.

This paper also examines how linguistic practices used by members of the US military on a daily basis inspire the formation of newfound identities among military members. The social identity theory and the process of social categorization characterize these military specific identities obtained by military members via language. Therefore, the identities created within members of the military are heavily characterized by each member’s belonging to the group and by each member’s physical proximity to other members. Along with a discussion of the influence of language on individual identity within the US military, this project proposes that member identities inspired by language contribute to the strengthening of the totalistic social structure of the military.

### 6.2 Implications

Although this paper focuses exclusively on language practices within the US military, my project also includes research on highly totalistic religious groups. I conducted an in-person interview with a Sociologist who specializes in studying alternative religions. Based on the data from this interview I suggest that language practices (i.e. jargon, politeness, terms of address, nicknames, etc.) are represented in similar ways between different totalistic social groups. For instance, the influence of jargon on identity among members of the US military is paralleled by the influence that jargon has on identities among members of some totalistic alternative religious groups. In both types of totalistic groups, jargon acts as a daily reminder of a member’s affiliation with the group, physical and emotional ties to the group, and reliance on the group.

Thus, across different totalistic social groups, jargon is used to create membership-oriented identities among group members, which in turn strengthens the totalistic social structure of the group. Essentially, language use within different totalistic social groups is often similar in the way that language is used to strengthen the social structure of these groups. Therefore, my research implies patterns of language use and the consequences of that language use across totalistic environments.

In addition to linguistic parallels between totalistic social groups the language practices discussed in this paper, including jargon, terms of address, linguistic politeness, and nicknames, are also found outside of totalistic social groups. People throughout the United States, regardless of social environment, use linguistic politeness when speaking to others in certain contexts. Nicknames are commonplace in daily life for people of all social classes and ages. Every profession, ranging from doctors to elementary school teachers, uses jargon and by doing so distinguishes that profession from other fields. Terms of address are also commonly found throughout society, for example consider how a high school student is expected to address their English teacher. Although language practices are similar across different social groups, both totalistic and non-totalistic, the implications of language use in totalistic groups are far more severe than within non-totalistic groups. More specifically, language holds heavier weight in totalistic groups because language acts as a key factor in the maintenance and strengthening of the totalistic social structure of these groups. Therefore, the entire social structure of totalistic groups, such as that of the US military, depends on members properly following the linguistic rules of the group. On the other hand, language does not work to support a totalistic social structure within non-totalistic groups and therefore, language use can have far more severe consequences and implications within totalistic environments.

Another implication that stems from my research involves how language is used as an influential tool within totalistic social groups. Totalistic groups, such as the US military, use specific language practices to generate desired behavior from group members. This creation of behavior is acknowledged throughout this paper. For instance, expected jargon use, expected politeness within interactions, and the proper use of terms of address among US military members are examples of language practices enforced by military leadership to create desired behavior within members of the group. Although the use of language to influence behavior is widespread within the military, and within other totalistic groups, the use of language to guide the behaviors of others is not a totalistic specific phenomenon. Using the power of language as a tool to encourage an individual to act a certain way is found within totalistic environments and outside of totalistic environments. For example, teachers speak to students in particular ways to encourage those students to pay attention in class, parents speak to children in specific ways to mold polite behaviors within those children, and employees speak to bosses with linguistic politeness when hoping for a raise. My research shows how language within totalistic groups, specifically the US military, is used to formulate desired behaviors among members. However, language is something that people in all social environments and all societies use to influence the behaviors of others.

A final implication of this paper is that this research project sheds light on how dependent totalistic social groups are on language. As I have discussed in this paper, totalistic social structures are maintained and strengthened by members adhering to group rules and recognizing the legitimacy of group leadership and group hierarchy. Therefore, the linguistic practices used within totalistic groups encourage members to conform to group rules and standards of behavior. Since language is a vital tool to maintain the totalistic social structures of the US military and

other totalistic groups, totalistic social structure heavily relies on members using group-strengthening language practices.

### 6.3 Issues for Further Research

In this section I discuss three issues for further research within the topic of language and totalistic social groups. The first issue concerns totalistic groups beyond the US military. This paper focused primarily on the US military and although I discuss parallels in language use between the US military and totalistic religious groups, more research is needed in order to better understand the extent of the patterns of language use across totalistic groups. Future research should explore these linguistic patterns among totalistic groups by studying language use in various totalistic environments such as: boarding/military schools, prisons, totalistic religious cults and sects, and totalitarian nations. By researching language use in totalistic groups beyond the US military, the topic of language and totalism will be expanded and the influence that language has on individuals living within encapsulated environments will be better understood.

The second issue for further research involves an aspect of my survey data that does not fit into my claims on how language influences the social structure of the US military. One respondent to my survey indicated that they felt positively about not receiving a nickname during their time as a military member. In section 5.2 above, I argue that nicknames act as a bonding agent between members of the military and thus, members giving/using nicknames for other members is an act of positive politeness that strengthens the social structure of the group as a whole. A member of the military who feels positively about not receiving a military nickname does not directly fit into my proposal of nicknames as a form of positive politeness within the military. Further research should explore lack of nicknames among some military members and why some members feel positively about never receiving a nickname. By doing so, we can look at how the totalistic social structure of the US military is influenced by members who do not adhere to certain common language practices of the group.

Further research should also aim to obtain data from larger and more inclusive sample sizes within the US military to better understand how language is used across different branches of the military and across different military contexts. For instance, further research should explore if there are differences in jargon use within the US Marines versus the US Air Force, or if linguistic politeness strategies vary between Navy Seal training and basic training environments. By expanding the research topic of language use in the US military, a more in-depth and widespread understanding of language use in the military (and in totalistic social groups) can be achieved. Gaining a deeper and broader knowledge of language use in the military will allow for stronger claims as to how language influences the totalistic social structure of the US military as well as how totalistic social environments depend on and thrive off of the use of language.

Appendix  
Survey Questions

Q8 Please select your age

- 18-25 years
  - 26-35 years
  - 36-45 years
  - 46-55 years
  - 55+ years
- 

Q9 Please select your gender

- Male
  - Female
  - Transgender
  - Non-binary
  - Other
  - Prefer not to answer
- 

Page Break

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Q1 Are you currently a member of the ROTC US Military program?

Yes

No

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Q35 How long have you been a member of an ROTC Program?

Less than 1 year

1-2 years

2-3 years

3-4 years

More than 4 years

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Q36 Are you currently a full-time active member of the United States Military?

Yes

No

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Q37 How many years have you been a full-time active member?

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Q38 Are you currently a non-full time non-active member of the United States Military? Non-active here includes any member of the military who identifies as veteran, retired, separated, or reserve.

Yes

No

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Q39 Please indicate how many years you spent employed by the US military.

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Q10 In military training how did your superiors most often address you when they spoke to you directly? Please select all that apply.

- By your first name
- By your last name
- By your full name (first and last)
- By your rank
- Other

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Q40 Additional comments

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Q11 In military training how did your superiors most often address you and your peers as a group?

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Q12 Were you ever given a nickname either by a superior or a peer during your time in the military?

Yes

No

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Q13 How did you feel about the nickname that was given to you?

Positively

Somewhat positively

Indifferent

Somewhat negatively

Negatively

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Q47 Additional comments

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Q14 How did not receiving a nickname make you feel?

- Positively
- Somewhat positively
- Indifferent
- Somewhat negatively
- Negatively

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Q46 Additional comments

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Q15 How often were you referred to by this nickname while in the military?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never
- I'm not sure

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Q16 How comfortable did you feel speaking to your superiors in the Military?

- Comfortable
- Slightly comfortable
- Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable
- Slightly uncomfortable
- Uncomfortable

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Q48 Additional comments

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Q21 In the military were you expected to salute an officer?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes
- Unsure

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Q49 Additional Comments

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Q22 How often would you address your superior with a formal title (Ma'am, Sir, etc.)?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

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Q45 Additional comments

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Q23 Were you ever reprimanded for incorrectly addressing a superior?

Yes

No

Unsure

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Q41 Additional comments

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Page Break

Q24 How often were your interactions with superiors formal?

- Always formal
- Often formal
- Sometimes formal
- Rarely formal
- Never formal
- Unsure

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Page Break

Q25 How approachable were your superiors?

- Very approachable
- Approachable
- Somewhat approachable
- Unapproachable
- Unsure

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Page Break

Q17 In the military, did you ever use phrases, words, codes, or other language practices that you had never used before entering the military?

Yes

No

Unsure

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Q18 Please provide any examples of these language practices that you recall

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Q19 How often did you use these new language practices while in the military?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

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Q32 Additional comments

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Q20 Do you ever find yourself using these specific military language practices in civilian life?

Yes

No

Unsure

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Q51 Additional comments

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Q26 During your time in military training did you generally feel respected by your peers?

Yes

No

Unsure

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Q31 Additional comments

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