Sławomir Kułacz

Conceptualization of selected army ranks in English, German, Polish and Czech

Sławomir Kułacz
University of Gdańsk
Poland

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1. Introduction

The present paper looks at a section of military nomenclature in English, German, Polish and Czech. Since, as adherents of cognitive linguistics claim, linguistic organization partially reflects the nature and organization of human thought and experience, it is natural to suppose that an inquiry into the language of army ranks should provide an insight into the army-related social structure and experience. And this is precisely the aim of this paper: to describe — by analysing the semantics of names of selected army ranks — the ways in which the army-related conceptualizations of experience are structured.

This does not mean that cognitive linguistics should be an entirely pioneering enterprise in this field. As observed by Geeraerts (2006:368-386), in cognitive lexical semantics, semantic investigations owe as much to the discoveries of the historical-philological tradition as they do to the analysis of cognitive structure undertaken by cognitive linguistics. Thus, despite the constant

references made in this paper to the cognitive solutions, it is the latter, "philological tradition" that is the basis of the theoretical model adopted for the purpose of the present analysis.

My treatment concerns basic army ranks as such and their places in army personnel hierarchy, conventionalized as a vertical line with its bottom, top and intermediate levels. This hierarchy is based on an interplay of notions of age and elevation. As marked in dictionaries, *senior*'s second sense is 'someone high or higher in rank' (CIDE, emphasis mine, S.K.). Analogically, a *junior* is 'someone low or lower rank.'

Although it can be said that the discoveries of cognitive sciences and cognitive linguistics have much contributed to the study of meaning after the stagnation under the Generativists, it is too early to boast the discovery of language-independent motivation "supertheory". It will most probably never be possible to account for the whole of linguistic structure. The search for motivation, however, can be regarded as one of the most useful methods of obtaining insight into the nature of language. Motivational explanations are not mere speculations, neither are they "nomological-deductive explanations in the 'hard' sciences, but more in the spirit of what Wilhelm Dilthey characterized as 'understanding' (*verstehen*) in the humanities or cultural sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*)" (Radden and Panther 2004:41).

The notion of motivation is related to that of explanation; the description of a motivational relation constitutes one type of explanation, but not every explanation is based on motivation. Explanation is regarded as establishing a "connection or relation between hitherto unconnected things or facts" (Berg 1998:11). Both linguists and lay people are able to "explain", but linguistic phenomena are beyond lay people's awareness. However, attempts of the latter often reduce to folk etymology.

The remainder of the paper is an attempt at finding language-independent factors motivating names of army ranks.

1.1. Data and methodology

For the sake of clarity only the basic and historically well-grounded ranks will be investigated, excluding their stratified forms, which matter will, however, be addressed later. Only infantry ranks are taken into consideration,[1] although a number of them are also found in other components of the army, the navy and air forces, as well as the police and similar services.

Under the label "German" also the Austrian and Swiss armies are to be understood, as they follow a similar tradition. By "English" I mean also the American, Canadian and Australian armies, which basically follow the English system.

2. Analysis

2.1. What is a military rank?

Although associations with the equivalents of "military rank" can be different (please compare: *Militärische Dienstgrad* 'military service/duty rank/grade/level,' *stopień wojskowy* 'military rank/degree,' *vojenská hodnost* 'military rank /title/position/grade/dignity'), what it refers to functions in a much universal, highly conventional and history-derived system. Here 'conventional' is not to be understood as arbitrary, especially followed by "history derived". As it is aimed to prove, both the system and its components are, to a vast extent, motivated. By ascribing certain titles to people, the army defines their place in the hierarchy, the posts they occupy and the scope of their responsibilities. In relation to each other, the soldiers can be either superior, subordinate or equal. Various types of uniform insignia denote the bearer's rank.

Among army personnel three mayor groups are distinguishable:
1. Soldiers. The word was first used in English ca. 1300; borrowed from Old French *souldier* which ultimately comes

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[1] Traditional cavalry and artillery ranks (mainly ranks of non-commissioned officers) were also excluded, though it is not claimed that they are not worth attention.

from Medieval Latin *soldarius*, lit. *'one having pay'*. This was based on *soldius*, the name of a Roman gold coin. *Soldier* is a cognate of Italian *soldato* and German *Soldat*, Russian *солдат* and Polish *żołnierz*. In non-specialist use, *soldier* also embraces Non-Commissioned Officers and Officers.

2. Non-Commissioned Officers.[2] The English name refers to military officers who have not been given a commission, i.e. a document certifying the appointment by a sovereign power. Classified as Sub-Officers outside the Commonwealth and USA.[3]

3. Officers. The word derives from Old French *officer*, ultimately from Medieval Latin *officarius*, coined from *officium* 'duty, service'. The military sense was first recorded 1560s.

2.2. Preliminary observations

All the lexemes presented in the analysis are masculine nouns. As marked in dictionaries, a single name investigated here is understood in two ways:

1. the rank,
2. the person with a rank.

Since most of the military ranks were formed considerably long ago, their motivation is opaque to the contemporary speakers (the degree varies among the languages). A dictionary survey allows tracing back the formation of those lexemes, and to discern and group many of the motivating factors.

The following can be observed:

English *Private* (based on Latin *privatus* and dates from the Middle Ages, when there functioned "private soldiers" who were either hired, conscripted or feudalized into service by a nobleman) is an interesting

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[2] Sometimes spelled noncommissioned officer, abbreviated to NCO or non-com (US English).

[3] Ger. *Unteroffiziere*, Pol. *podoficerowie*, Cz. *poddůstojníci*.

but isolated example of a rank, as are other ranks at this level: the Polish name is motivated by the typical way soldiers are to gather – fallen in (*szereg – Szeregowy*: one in a row). The German rank originates from the typical activity, i.e. firing (*schießen – Schütze*: the one who fires) and there used to be a counterpart rank in the Polish Army (*Strzelec* 'the one who fires'). Czech uses a word for a soldier or warrior that comes from Old Slavic (*Vojín*) and although it has its Polish cognates (*woj, wojownik*), these are not present in army nomenclature.

German *Gefreiter* and Czech *Svobodník* are names given to people who were 'exempted' from some kind of supervision (loan translation of Latin *exemptus*); in military context a *Gefreiter* has one supervisor less than a private. Although etymologies are different, the motivation is the same. The Czech name is most probably a loan translation of the German name.

Corporal is a fairly common rank. It does not occur in the German army, but does in the Austrian (*Korporal*). Etymological dictionaries trace the word back to Italian *Caporale* (originally from Latin *corpo* 'body') and entries such as '[s]o called because he was in charge of a body of troops'[4] are only partially true. The whole Italian phrase which needs to be considered is *capo corporale*, meaning "head of a body". "Head (*capo*) of the body (*corpo*)" is a concept reflected in other military rank, i.e. *Captain*, discussed below.[5]

Zugsführer and *Plutonowy* have different etymologies, yet are both examples of formation by metonymy; literally the leader (*Führer*) of a platoon (*Zug*). Der Zug is, among other things, a column or row of people and this particular meaning is most likely to have motivated

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[4] To be found at http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=corporal [Retrieved 2.12.2010]. The phrase *body of troops* is not found in other languages and it was not England where the name of rank developed.

[5] The first element, *capo* and the concept of LEADER was utilized for the name of a function Nazi Concentration Camps. *Kapos* and *Oberkapos* were themselves prisoners, only they were assigned to supervise forced labour or carry out administrative tasks. Speculations of the name being an acronym of *Ka*meradschafts*po*lizei, (roughly, "comrade police") are void.

the name of the tactical subunit. *Zugsführer* functions exclusively in the Austrian Army. Polish *Plutonowy* stems from French *peloton* 'a group of people', and later in the military sense "platoon", i.e. tactical subunit.

English *Sergeant* and Polish *Sierżant*, as etymology suggests, were a kind of a subordinate, a servant (French *sergent*) or simply an assistant of officers.

Different names of an *ensign* have given rise to related names of ranks (*Ensign, Chorąży, Praporčík*). They will be extensively commented below.

English *Lieutenant* and German *Leutnant* both come from French *lieu + tenant*, which stand for 'place' and 'holder'/'occupant' respectively. Hence *Lieutenant* describes a placeholder.

The West Slavic names of ranks, the Polish *Porucznik* and Czech *Poručík* have a common source as well: Old Czech verb *poručiti* 'command, dictate to, enjoin' and noun *poručník* 'curator, guardian.' At this point we notice that those names fit our image of historical relationships between the officers, where a general would temporarily entrust (*poruczyć, poručiti*) his younger colleague with his duties. He would then be a deputy, a second-in-command, a *Lieutenant* or *Porucznik*. In this case the names were motivated by the young officers' responsibilities. Additionally, *Lieutenant* functions in civil contexts, as in 'Lieutenant Governor.'

Captain, Kapitan and Kapitán stem from Old French *capitaine* 'captain, leader,' from Late Latin *capitaneus* 'chief,' noun use of adjective *capitaneus* 'prominent, chief,' from Latin caput 'head'. German *Hauptmann* uses a calque (*Haupt* 'head'). It is common in metaphorical conceptualization of leadership to use an image schema[6] in which a unit is a body over which a *head* 'caput' is placed.

Major stems from a Latin root and is present in all four languages. It was originally a Latin irregular comparative of the adjective[7] *magnus* 'large, great'.

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[6] Image schemas are prelinguistic structures of experience.
[7] Note that there are both nominal and adjectival uses of *major* in English.

Polish *Pułkownik* and Czech *Plukovník* come from *pełk* – an ancient Slavic word for 'a group of soldiers and folk'. German *Oberst* 'Colonel' comes from German *oberst* 'top, topmost, uppermost, highest, chief'.

The rank *General* exists in every language investigated (with minor phonological alterations, of course) as it has its roots in Latin. The word often is a synonym of *common, broad, total.* As German historically distinguished between commanders – heads of cavalry and infantry (*Obester zu Fuß* ['by foot'], *Oberster zu Pferd* ['by horse']) so did other languages begin to qualify different generals:

   1. *Brigadier-general, Brigadegeneral, Generał brygady, Brigádní general.*
   2. *Major-general, Generalmajor, Generał dywizji, Generálmajor.*
   3. *Lieutenant-general, Generalleutnant, Generał broni, Generálporučík.*
   4. *General, General, Generał armii, Armádní general.*

Only in the first one do the languages accord with the conceptualization of general as a commander of a brigade.

In the second one, Polish retains this mode i.e. naming after unit, as it has a general as the commander of a division. A similar phenomenon is present in next example, where the generals used to be the commanders of a unit belonging to a specific branch of the army (*broń*) e.g. infantry '*Generał piechoty*'. Nowadays, only the collective '*Generał broni*' is used.

In the last case Polish and Czech terms imply that an officer is a commander of an army (in the sense of a union — a military unit usually consisting of two or more corps with supporting arms and services).

The rank of Marshal (German origin), present in English and German (here also historically *Feldmarschall* 'Fieldmarshal') as well as in Polish (nowadays only *Marszałek Polski* 'Marshal of Poland'), is an example of amelioration.

2.3. Further observations

a) conceptual metaphor:
Oberst 'Colonel' is a metaphorical extension of German *oberst* 'top, topmost, uppermost, highest, chief'. This and many similar metaphorical linguistic expressions reveal that humans very often tend to conceive of someone or something of an important status as being high[8] – this is a conceptual metaphor formulated thus: CONTROL IS ABOVE, IMPORTANCE / STATUS IS HIGH. The very expression "high rank" is of course is based upon conceptual metaphor too.

Another closely related metaphor transpires from the rank of *Major.* This is most probably motivated this by a metaphor IMPORTANT IS BIG (see Goatly 2007:35).

Captain, Kapitan and *Kapitán* all have common Latin etymology, which is *caput* 'head'. The reason for calling leaders by this name (*caput* and its derivatives) is the observation of similarities of control functions (and primacy in the functioning of a system) of head and commanders, thus the metaphor HEAD IS THE LOCUS OF CONTROL. This is only an example of the very productive patterns of metaphorical thought. Instances of captains can be found also in sport (team captain) and air and sea transport (e.g. a ship's captain), including navy (interestingly, the German naval rank is *Kapitän,* not *Hauptmann*), as well as the Polish fire service.

b) metonymy:
In numerous examples we notice that the easiest way to coin a unit commander's name was the very name of the unit with an addition of a suffix (e.g. agent-forming suffix *-nik/-ník* in West Slavic languages). Examples include:
- *Zugsführer* – leader (*Führer*) of a platoon (*Zug*)
- *Plutonowy* – leader of a platoon (*pluton*)
- *Četař* – leader of a squad (*četa*)
- *Desátník* – leader of ten (*deset*) soldiers

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[8] Conceptual metaphor is defined as the understanding of one idea in terms of another.

- *Plukovník* – leader of a regiment (*pluk*)
- *Pułkownik* – leader of a regiment (*pułk*)[9]

Here, the name of an item (or abstract concept) gives rise to the name of a person associated with it, which is one of the kinds of metonymy. Bearing in mind that economy is the main feature of military language, one cannot think of a more economical coinage of leaders' names.

Please observe an interesting commonality. Each of the languages investigated has a rank name originating from the name of an ensign, understood both as a banner (often with a coat of arms) and a unit. Please compare:

- *Ensign* (only historically) – *ensign* (English)
- *Fähnrich* – *Fahne* (cf. Fahnenträger) (German)
- *Chorąży* – *chorągiew* (Polish)
- *Praporčík* – *prapor* (Czech).

c) perceptual motivation:

The rank of Colonel comes ultimately from Italian *colonnella*[10] 'commander of a c o l u m n of soldiers at the head of a regiment,' from Latin *columna* 'pillar'. A similar motivation is found in *Zugsführer*, where *Zug* stands for a column of soldiers.

Another rank, *Szeregowy*, comes from Hungarian *sereg* meaning (1) 'army', (2) 'crowd' (3) 'flock', (4) 'multitude'. In Polish it was extended to the sense of a 'row,' in the military context, a row of soldiers fallen in, facing a commander. Thus *szeregowy* means one in a row. Polish plural form *szeregi* can be, additionally, equated with Hungarian sense 1.

These examples reveal that, although similar, the two arrangements of people (or more generally, objects) must have been based on different schemata, as they triggered distinct linguistic realizations. In

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[9] Compare also Hungarian *ezred* 'regiment' and *ezredes* 'colonel' (leader of regiment).

[10] Modified by dissimilation i.e. the process by which one of two similar or identical sounds in a word becomes less like the other.

Italian, an elongated assembly of soldiers, one behind the other, led to the creation of a metaphorical name for it (the perceived similarity of a column and the assembly) and by metonymy, the leader of it marching at the head of it was given the name of a *colonella.* In Polish, an assembly of soldiers, one next to the other gave rise (by metonymy again) to the name of one element in it.

d) complex categorization:
Compounds, such as *Generał dywizji,* require special attention. The meanings of these ranks are highly compositional, i.e. the meaning of the whole may be predictable from the meanings of the parts and the way they are put together.
    In the case of other rank compounds such as *Major-general* and *Lieutenant-general* (and their German counterparts), the meaning is not correctly predictable though motivated by the parts.

e) figure/ground organization:
The generals (here I mean only the English *brigadier-general* and all Polish generals, since their function surfaces in a linguistic expression) can be seen in terms of figure/ground organization where the profile is the entity designated by the word and the base is the essential part of the domain matrix necessary for understanding the profile (Evans and Green 2006:237). These commanders (figures) differ with respect to the ground they take, i.e. the unit they lead. For instance in B*rigadier-general,* the general is the profile, the brigade is the base. More clearly, a *Zugsführer* is meaningless without its *Zug* 'platoon' as there is no platoon leader without the platoon.

f) grammaticalization:
The experience of hierarchy is reflected in language. A number of ranks were given prefixes, such as *pod-, Unter-, Ober-, nad-* and thereby split; two unequal positions were established. For instance, one of the lieutenants was to be lower in hierarchy (junior), the other was to hold higher position (senior). To this statement a twofold explanation is due.

1. The prefixes are no longer prepositions: neither free morphemes nor separate lexical items. They have undergone the process of grammaticalization and are bound morphemes.
2. The employment of prepositions (before they underwent grammaticalization) links our investigation to the conceptual metaphor SUPERIORITY IS UP / INFERIORITY IS DOWN. In the human conceptual system, entities in a hierarchy are viewed as positioned one above another, where the top is associated with the greatest importance.

Surprisingly, the Czech system, although linguistically rooted in the Slavic group, represents the German system of stratification. This is represented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Stratifications of the Lieutenant rank.

English	German	Czech	Polish
2ND Lieutenant	UNTERleutnant	Poručík	PODporucznik
	Leutnant		
(1ST) Lieutenant	OBERleutnant	NADporučík	Porucznik
			NADporucznik

From the basis of "Lieutenant", languages added one *stratum* above or below. The Polish Army at one stage had a *Nadporucznik*, which was a direct equivalent of a *Oberleutnant* (both from the linguistic and organizational perspective), but it is no longer used. This discrepancy may be the reason of erroneous translation. *Unterleutnant* was used in Germany and Austria[11] in the 19th century.

Another way of extending the list is to add either *Senior*/*starszy*, or *Junior*/*młodszy* to the actual rank. This is based on the common metaphorical conceptualization of seniority, with the elders being higher than the young. Note that the armies following British tradition

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[11] However with French spelling: *-lieutenant*. Here, *Unterlieutenants* could be additionally stratified into *Unterlieutenant 1. Classe* and *Unterlieutenants 2. Classe.*

extend the list of ranks by marking the ranks with "Class" (e.g. Private 1st Class) or "First"/"Second" (e.g. 1st Lieutenant).

The German military can be considered the most "productive" in the Non-Commissioned-Officers ranks because of the variety of -*anwärter* 'candidate' ranks, counterparts of which are to an extent also present in other armies.

3. Conclusions

I have tried to address the issue of conceptualization of selected army ranks in the four languages I know.

None of the ranks' names were once meaningless neologisms. Instead, they were formed in motivated processes of semantic change (the basis here being the original vocabulary of the language or borrowings). The etymological investigations presented in the initial part of the analysis were a base for the description of the conceptual basis present at the time of the rank's formation.

The development from civil to military uses of words[12] provides an interesting insight into how the army organization and the relationships between army personnel (hierarchy) are conceptualized. On the basis of a questionnaire completed by a few of my Polish, Czech and German friends, I claim that non-specialists are only able to correctly define a limited number of ranks, namely those which were formed by metonymy (*Plutonowy, Pułkownik, Desátník* etc). Metonymic formations are most common in Polish and Czech. A good knowledge of Latin can help in deciphering the meanings behind *Major* and *General.* Most officer ranks are Latin-derived and as *Corporal* in the NCO corps, are very common in European Armies. In soldiers' ranks, Latin borrowings are less common; German uses only German names (apart from *Soldat*) and the modern Czech army uses exclusively Czech names.

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[12] The language of the military is always based on a general language. The differences reside in vocabulary and idioms. Additionally, military personnel usually develop a jargon which rather relates to their everyday service and is unique to a group, generation and/or region and is primarily oral in form. Military language, on the other hand, covers military ranks, names of units, weaponry, strategy, tactics etc.

New army structures and new roles within them called for apt verbalization of the positions; one's importance would find its expression in names such as *General, Major* or *Captain,* whereas one's submission would be expressed by names like *Lieutenant* and *Sergeant.* This effect could be additionally enhanced by the use of prefixes such as *Unter-* 'sub' and *Ober-* 'over'. To talk about abstract hierarchies and people's place within them ("high position in the army" or "Major is a rank next below a Lieutenant Colonel and next above a Captain") and promotion ("climbing up the ladder"), conceptual metaphor was needed. The examples above are a piece of evidence supporting the claim about the vital role conceptual metaphor is held to play in organizing human thought.

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