



A SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS AND EXPOSITION OF THE RUSSIAN MILITARY TERM 'MASKIROVKA' [маскировка].

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ABSTRACT

This paper¹ describes the progress to date of a part-time PhD on the topic of '*Maskirovka*', in the context of the Russian (and Soviet) military. A mixed methods approach, utilising analytical techniques from language-based disciplines, such as applied linguistics, lexicography and translation studies, has been conducting a systematic exposition of the topic. The study has employed qualitative text-analysis, intertextual analysis and multimodal analysis on a repository of N=161 original source texts between 1914 – 2024, and N=39 Russian military dictionaries and lexica between 1795 - 2024. Some initial insights and findings are described.

Keywords: Maskirovka; Camouflage; Deception; Russia; Soviet; Military; Linguistics.

1. BACKGROUND

The use of the Russian term *Maskirovka* (Маскировка) has re-emerged among the Western media and intelligentsia in recent years; having previously been recognised by western militaries after their study of, and interactions with, the Soviet military during the Second World War (aka the Great Patriotic War [GPW] in Soviet and Russian history). However, it is important to mention that in civilian Russian society, the term maskirovka is not seen as only a military term. As a term that connotes masking, disguise and concealment it is an everyday term in non-military contexts; for example, it has been used within book titles for both adult books (Aleshkovsky, 2016) and children's books (Cope, 2009; Nikolaevna, 2019). It is also used in the academic sector, where an early use of the term appeared in two volumes of the St. Petersburg Mineralogical Society (1875, 1877), where it appeared in reference to the disguised appearance of rocks and formations.

NATO's understanding of maskirovka developed during the Cold War; however, a lack of access to original Russian and Soviet military literature, and limited western expertise in Russian culture and the Russian language led to groupthink on the topic. From significant PhD reading of the historical western military literature, it has been observed that a relatively small group of authors tended to cite the core Soviet articles; for example, the works of Keating (1981), Stevens and Marsh (1982a, 1982b), Beaumont (1982), Hamilton (1986), Heuer (1987), Sullivan (1987), Trulock III (1987), Glantz (1987, 1989), Armstrong (1988) and Smith (1988) all shared similar, narrow citation patterns by citing among Matsulenko (1972, 1975a, 1975b), Shchedrov (1966), Beketov, Belokon and Chermashentsev (1976), Zhukov (1977), Malisov (1979), Limno and Gorkin (1980) and Dashevsky (1980), as well as consistently referring to the Soviet Military Encyclopaedia (Ogarkov et al., 1978). These western (predominantly U.S.) authors would also occasionally cite each other.

In today's context, the contemporary media and academic intelligentsia started using the term after a series of high-profile events, for which deceptive Russian behaviour was attributed, namely: the annexation of Crimea in 2014, online interference during the United

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Kingdom's 2016 referendum on membership of the European Union, the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election (as well as a host of other European elections between 2016 and today), and the 2018 Novichok poisonings in Salisbury, UK. Examples of its resurgent use include Elliott (2018), who makes a series of assumptions about the term, e.g. that it means 'masking'; that it is a doctrine; that it is a strategy, which has persisted since Russian imperialist days and has been used by Russia for centuries; that it has morphed into a geopolitical strategy. Vasara (2021, p.32) refers to maskirovka as "the Russian practice of secrecy and deception". Moore (2019, p.4) refers to it in the context of "strategic deception (strategicheskaya maskirovka)" and Alexandru and Totir (2021, p.147) erroneously state that "Maskirovka or Russian military diversion is a doctrine developed at the beginning of the 20th century". Furthermore, in recognition of its modern incarnation, Janiczek (2002) refers to the 'new' maskirovka, Maier (2016) refers to 'evolving' maskirovka, and Gartner (2020) refers to it as 'Maskirovka 2.0'.

The mixed interpretations of maskirovka is not new, and during the Cold War era a serving U.S. military linguist (Bob Makinen) published an article that criticised the West's less than optimal translation and interpretation of Soviet military language, and the Russian language in general (Makinen, 1985). Some quotes by Makinen help to set the scene:

"To know the opponent is a fundamental precept of strategy, yet guilelessly we are sabotaging the purveyor of such intimate knowledge — language. While the English language is being emasculated by laxity and imprecision, the Russian language's conceptual wealth is denied analysts, who have either no language expertise or just enough to constitute a menace" (p.37).

"Pointless, artificial application of different terms to similar concepts, originating as hasty analysis of mistranslated terminology but now justified protectively by false notions of mystique" (p.42).

Makinen also specifically addresses maskirovka in his article, when he accuses western analysts of "analytical acrobatics to explain maskirovka" (p.39), claiming that the highly popularised translation of maskirovka "has been rendered impotent by redundancy" (p.39), and also that "an unnatural obsession with exaggerated exactness gives birth to new words such as 'disinformation' and now threatens to pollute the English language with the superfluity of 'maskirovka'" (p.39). The motivation for Makinen's rather strident essay is two-fold. Firstly, linguistic infidelity introduces errors, creates confusion and leads to imprecision. The second point is a manifestation of the first, which is that one fails to fully understand one's opponent, which is essential if one is to out-think, out-decide and out-act them in combat or warfare; or, in the context of deterrence, it could lead to miscalculation and escalation.

To end this section there are two fantastic quotes that sum up the situation with non-Russian interpretations of maskirovka. Firstly, in Ronald Hingley's book *The Russian Mind* (1977, p.77), he comments that [the] "Russian [language] may possess as large a vocabulary for terminological inexactitude as Arabic has for different kinds of camel", and lastly, Smith (1988, p.29) who commented that "Russian terms are not always easily translated into English. Maskirovka is an excellent example".

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

From reading both the historical and contemporary western literature on maskirovka, and bearing in mind the observations of Makinen (1985), this paper's author was compelled to undertake a PhD research study, driven by the following basic research questions:

1. When did the term маскировка enter the formal Russian military lexica?
2. What does the term маскировка mean, according to Russian military thought?

3. What has been the contextual framing of the term Маскировка within these texts?

4. How do images support the understanding of its contextual presentation?

3. SOURCE MATERIAL

The primary source material for this study are original Russian military texts (articles, books, reports, etc.), where the term 'маскировка' is in the title. The reason for requiring the term in the title is so that it is clear that maskirovka is the main focus and topic of interest. Currently, at this stage of the study, there is a repository of N=161 texts, between 1914 - 2024. These texts are in a range of formats, e.g. .docx, .pdf, .djvu, e-posts online, e-books (Google Books), microfiche, and hard copy. In addition, there are approximately 100 other citations, but these cannot be analysed as the author does not have access to this material, due to a range of factors, for example:

- Unaware of where it is physically or electronically located;
- May no longer exist in hard copy or electronic format;
- Is located in other countries that cannot be accessed (e.g. USA, Russia, Estonia);
- Must pay a seller, and predominantly bought online (esp. in Russian roubles).

The secondary source material for this study are original Russian military dictionaries and similar lexica. Currently, at this stage of the study, there is a repository of N=39 dictionaries and similar lexica that have been analysed, between 1795 and today's online encyclopaedic dictionary of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation. This material is also in a range of formats, e.g. .docx, .pdf, .djvu, e-posts online, e-books (Google Books) and hard copy. The hard copy material sits in various institutions, e.g. the University of Oxford, the British Library, the Imperial War Museum, and the UK Defence Academy's Russian Military Studies Centre; as well as some being held as personal copies.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study is an exploratory, yet systematic, exposition into a niche area of language-based military-focused research; therefore, focusing on a single or traditional theoretical framework may be too narrow or limiting. Instead, an interdisciplinary approach that utilises appropriate aspects across different academic disciplines (i.e. applied linguistics, translation studies, lexicography). This is seen as a more viable and pragmatic approach to discovery and the creation of new knowledge. In order to address the aforementioned research questions the following analysis techniques were adopted.

4.1 Specialist genres and specialist texts

Specialist genres are topics or concepts that contain specific or specialist texts, information and language; and can provide an evidence-based approach to language-based research (Handford, 2012). Specialist genres have a number of benefits, for example, due to their homogeneity and representativeness they can be smaller in terms of the size of corpora or archive, whilst still possessing robust validity. Smaller and specialised material are often set up for more focused research purposes, which in turn yield more relevant and specific research insights. Additionally, specialist material enables a closer link between the material and its context, by gaining insights into patterns of language use in particular contextual settings. They possess sufficient contextual information to allow plausible interpretation of the research questions.

Alongside the specialised texts (i.e. articles, books, reports) the study also analyses specialised dictionaries, which Humbley (2021, p.317) refers to "by the specialised nature of the subject they treat, focusing on particular subject fields, professional practices...with the aim of helping the user to acquire specialised knowledge" (p.317). Specialised dictionaries include different formats, such as terminological dictionaries, glossaries, lexicons and

encyclopaedia; and they can also be referred to as 'LSP' (language for special purposes). Interestingly, it has been said that "dictionaries are about words, encyclopaedias are about things" (Tarp, 2021, p.243). As with traditional dictionaries, specialised dictionaries can be monolingual, bilingual or multilingual; as well as unidirectional or bidirectional. They may be arranged alphabetically or thematically; and they might cover the entirety of a specific domain, or a narrower sub-field within a specific domain.

Studying specialist genres and specialist texts is important because the data is in its authentic language, and that is likely to be specialised language in a specific -lect (e.g. idiolect, ethnolect), and even a form of domainlect, such as the military (Handford, 2012; Koester, 2012). Also, the analyst is normally also the compiler of the source material, therefore, they could possess a level of subject matter expertise (SME) on the topic, which aids subsequent analysis and interpretation.

4.2 Qualitative content (text) analysis

Stone, Dunphy, Smith and Ogilvie (1966, p.5), stated that Content analysis (CA) is "any research technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics within text". In support of this, others (see Neuendorf, 2002; Krippendorff, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Sandorova, 2014) suggest that CA is a form of textual analysis that describes a range of quantitative and qualitative techniques for analysing the content of texts, in order to make valid inferences to the context of their use.

Qualitative CA helps to develop knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon being studied, therefore, it focuses on language, communication and contextual meaning of the content. Kuckartz (2014, p.31) supports this when stating that qualitative CA should be "focused on discovering the meaning within texts and analysing their communicative content" and that "qualitative text analysis is a form of analysis in which an understanding and interpretation of the text play a far larger role than in classical content analysis" (p.33). This is similar to the concept of hermeneutics, which relates to explaining, interpreting and translating; and has been applied to qualitative text analysis; and includes the postulation that "we can only understand texts and communication in general – or think we can understand them – through an interpretive process" (Kuckartz, 2014, p.20).

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) define qualitative CA as "the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p.1278). As a basic, universal approach, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) described the fundamental CA process as the four "C"s: Coding, Categorising, Comparing and Concluding, whereby the researcher seeks to break down the text into meaningful units of analysis, before presenting that analysis in an economic and appropriate form. Therefore, in the present study, qualitative CA is being applied to the analysis of dictionary entries (single word study), definitions of maskirovka, and the contextual understanding of the N=161 texts in a bespoke database.

4.3 Intertextuality and paratextuality

In describing intertextuality, Allen (2022, p.1) suggests that "meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations". What he means by this is that texts may appear independent, and possess their own bespoke interpretation and meaning; however, those texts have been considered and tacitly written within a system of codes, traditions, processes and culture; therefore, the mere act of reading and interpreting a text within a specific (or specialised) genre or domain automatically places the person (producer or consumer) within a network of textual relations between texts.

Finding an agreed definition of intertextuality is an ironic endeavour, and Allen (2022) suggests that the concept is conceived, interpreted and defined in so many ways that an attempt to define it would be doomed to failure. However, he does cite Jessica Mason (2019), when using the phrase 'how readers and authors make connections between texts', which

seems like a simple, clear and concise shorthand for the concept of intertextuality, in the same vein that a similar approach for describing the concept of culture could be 'the way we do things around here'. This is further supported by Bonelli (2012, p.22), who suggests that "if several apparently unconnected people are observed constructing patterns with strong similarities to each other, such patterns are likely to be patterns of langue, the shared area of meaning-creation in a speech community". Therefore, intertextual seams run throughout the present study as a golden thread. They include the dictionary entries, the definitions of maskirovka, the contextual framing of the source texts in the database and the multimodal use of non-verbal signs (images).

As part of the contextual analysis of the database, the study is adopting an approach to analysing the paratext (aka peritext). Paratextuality is a sub-concept, or structural approach, to intertextuality. It relates to the metadata or peritext of a text, which includes (but is not limited to) information such as: the cover, author, title, headings, sub-headings, footnotes, notes, preface and epilogue. Allen (2022, p.100) usefully describes the concept of paratextuality as "elements which lie on the threshold of the text and which help to direct and control the reception of a text by its readers". Therefore, the paratext serves a pragmatic, but important, function by framing the text within a context, in order to guide the reader's interpretation. The paratext and a strong domain knowledge in the military helps to create the categories for the text database, whereby the core categories for contextual analysis are: year, publication type, title, military branch, level of activity, current or historical, specific purpose, image present.

4.4 Multimodal analysis

There is a body of research about visual methodologies and image analysis; for example, Pain (2012) suggests that visual data and methods strengthen data richness. This is supported by Glaw, Inder, Kable and Hazelton (2017, p.1), who state that visual methodologies:

"Enhance the richness of data by discovering additional layers of meaning, adding validity and depth, and creating knowledge. They add to traditional methods by capturing more detail and a different kind of data than verbal and written methods".

This multimodal approach can improve the present study in two ways; firstly, it can assist with expressing abstract ideas (such as 'deception'), and secondly, images can be seen as adjuncts to communication, whereby they provide a supplementary or supporting role to enhancing, as well as visualising, knowledge. Therefore, the use of multimodal analysis will be applied to the database of N=161 maskirovka texts that contain some type of image. The aim is to support contextual and intertextual analysis by enhancing meaning making.

5. INITIAL INSIGHTS

At the half-way point of this study there are number of interesting findings and insights that have started to emerge. However, it must be remembered that some of these may alter until the study is complete (due to complete in 2027).

5.1 Dictionaries

Between the years 1795 - 1914 the term maskirovka is only intermittently included in various dictionaries and lexica. Thus far, it is only present 50% of the time between these years. This finding starts to challenge the western assumptions and myths around Russian military maskirovka, which is the narrative that the Russian military always value it and that it has always been a part of Russian military thought. However, from 1914 until today it has been found to be consistent and ever present within Russian and Soviet military dictionaries.

Another insight is that it is often used interchangeably to describe mask(ing), disguise and camouflage. This latter use is also interesting because the Russian language has a word for camouflage (Камуфляж), but will also use maskirovka as a substitute.

5.2 Definitions

The translation and qualitative CA of N=11 formal definitions of maskirovka (1818 - 2024) shows that, initially, the concept was mainly referring to the Russian army, and focused at the tactical level of military activity. This clearly refers to the concealment and camouflage of artillery batteries, and the creation of fake cannons.

Over time these definitions become longer and more descriptive as maskirovka undergoes theoretical development. During the GPW (1941-45) the concept of the 'Operational' level of military activity takes hold and the terms 'Operational-tactical maskirovka' and 'operational maskirovka' emerge. In the late '60s and early 70s, as the Cold War heats up significantly, the term 'strategic maskirovka' is added to the lexicon. It is at this same time that a consistent concept of maskirovka emerges, which is a concept comprising of: concealment, imitation, demonstration and disinformation. Usefully, the analysis of the dictionaries and definitions has illuminated a wider set of Russian military deception-related terminology, as shown in Table 1.

A current limitation in this analysis is that after the 1818 definition there is a significant gap until 1958, with the other definitions being found in the 1960s, '80s, '90s, 2000s and today. Two encyclopaedic descriptions from the 1914 Military Encyclopaedia (Velichko et al) and the 1978 Soviet Military Encyclopaedia (Ogarkov et al) were omitted from analysis due to their extensive length, i.e. descriptions into the thousands of words, as opposed to definitions.

Table 1. Russian deception-related terminology.

English	Cyrillic	Transliteration
Military concepts (higher level)		
Stratagem	Стратегема	<i>Stratagem</i>
Deception, deceit	Обман	<i>Obman</i>
Cunning	Хитрость	<i>Khitrost'</i>
Surprise	Внезапность	<i>Vnezapnost'</i>
Misleading	Введению в заблуждение	<i>Vvedeniyu v zabluzhdeniye</i>
Ruse, Trick	Уловка	<i>Ulovka</i>
Craftiness	Лукáвство	<i>Lukávstvo</i>
Savvy	Смекалка	<i>Smekalka</i>
Deception-related terms		
Mask, disguise, camouflage (general)	Маскировка	<i>Maskirovka</i>
Imitation	Имитация	<i>Imitatsiya</i>
Demonstration	Демонстрация	<i>Demonstratsiya</i>
Disinformation	Дезинформация	<i>Dezinformatsiya</i>
Camouflage (specific)	Камуфляж	<i>Kamuflyazh</i>
Deformation	Деформация	<i>Deformatsiya</i>
Distort	Искажат	<i>Iskazhat</i>
Hiding, concealing	Скрытие	<i>Skrytiye</i>
Unmasking	Демаскировка	<i>Demaskirovka</i>
Trap	Западня Ловушка	<i>Zapadnya Lovushka</i>
Artifice	Выдумка	<i>Vydumka</i>
Lure	Приманка	<i>Primanka</i>
Mimic	Мимикрия	<i>Mymykriya</i>
Decoy	Ложная цель	<i>Lozhnaya tsel'</i>
Disorientate	Дезориентировать	<i>Dezoriyentirovat'</i>

5.3 Contextual framing

The contextual analysis is ongoing, and each year additional texts are added to the database; for two reasons: (1) historical texts are found, collected and added, (2) new texts are published by the Russian military. However, some initial observations are worth mentioning; for example:

1. It would appear that the dominant discussion and application of maskirovka has been toward the army, and the tactical level of military activity. This is certainly the case within the early texts, i.e. prior to the GPW (1941), but this has also been a consistent focus despite the emergence of the operational and strategic levels of operation, and the application to the navy and air force. This challenges the contemporary western assumption that modern maskirovka is predominantly strategic, geopolitical and digital.
2. There appears to be occasional patterns of a small number of specialists or SMEs in the topic across time; for example, Skylar (1920s), Bobrov, Ikonnikov and Timoshenko (1930s and '40s), Matsulenko (1970s), Orlyansky (2000s).
3. Different theoretical models of maskirovka have been applied for different contexts, by different authors. This suggests a freedom of intellectual discussion, challenge and development, which the west may not have assumed, especially during the times of Soviet Russia (1922 - 1991). This adds to the depth of complexity of the topic of maskirovka, rather than a narrow assumption by western observers.
4. Images, in different categories of format, are included as a prevalent supporting tool in up to 50% of texts in the database. This highlights the importance of images in support of contextual meaning making.

5.4 Multimodal analysis

This analysis will be undertaken in due course, during the last half of the study. However, it is clear from the contextual analysis that some form of image is present in many of the texts (approximately 50% of texts, at this stage). An initial consideration of a selection of images resulted in a draft set of categories, under which the images will be curated. These image categories include: photographs, drawings, illustrative, topographical, equipment, technical information (incl. mathematical formulae), people, methods and techniques, results and outcomes, theories and models of maskirovka.

6. SUMMARY AND REFLECTION

It is believed that, so far, this study has assembled and analysed the largest collection of original Russian and Soviet military texts with 'маскировка' in the title (N=161). This is almost certainly the case for the published western literature on this topic. This is further supported by a list of nearly 100 additional citations (to date) that cannot currently be accessed or analysed; but together they collectively push the assembled bibliography list of original Russian texts on this topic to 250 citations. There also remains the challenge to find specific published texts prior to 1914.

The analysis to date has found that maskirovka is a complicated term with a complicated history within Russian and Soviet military thought, military doctrine, military research and military application. The analysis is showing consistencies and inconsistencies, as well as change and adaptation, often coinciding with historical epochs and associated technological change, which is often the case with the history of warfare. The changes and developments in maskirovka demonstrates more diversity of theoretical and applied military thought domestically in Russia than maybe has been assumed by the West, both in the Soviet era of the Cold War and also today. Finally, this study has more to discover and understand in the remainder of its time (2025-27).

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