

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



IMPROVING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS TERMINOLOGY

Published by the
NATO Strategic Communications
Centre of Excellence



INTRODUCTION

The world is experiencing political turbulence. Buzzwords hijack political discourse, preventing, rather than enabling, meaningful critique and discussion. *In this contested space it is imperative that NATO member states communicate between themselves in the most precise, efficient, and frictionless way and strengthen the alliance's understanding and application of Strategic Communications.*

In October 2017 the Netherlands, one of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (StratCom COE) founding nations, requested a Strategic Communications terminology review project.¹ Over the past year a team of StratCom COE and external experts have been working to streamline and improve the language used in the StratCom community at NATO.

The project's key objectives are:

- Ensuring that the core terms and definitions are coherent across different areas of NATO StratCom and can be equally understood and applied by the military and civilian side.
- Creating a sense of responsibility for Strategic Communications throughout all of NATO.
- Improving the core terms and definitions to enable NATO to speak to the rest of the world in a language that is intuitive and limits potential misinterpretations.
- Contributing to the process of building a joint and future-oriented outlook for Strategic Communications within NATO.

The project team has consisted not only of military and terminology experts but also of representatives from academia and business operating in the field of StratCom.

This is not the first attempt by the NATO community to address StratCom

terminology, but it is the first occasion when an international body has become home to such a multi-national project and allocated resources specifically for this effort. The NATO StratCom COE has also ensured continuity and constant cross-sectoral and transatlantic participation in the project.²



WHY NOW?

■ The Status of Strategic Communications

Strategic Communications is a comparatively new field of practice and research, especially in NATO. *Strategic Communications is not yet a generally accepted mind-set throughout the organisation.* In fact, in the wider NATO community Strategic Communications has often been met with a lack of interest and acceptance.³

Clarifying terms and making definitions easily accessible to the wider NATO community is a way to improve the status and understanding of StratCom in NATO. The question of terminology is linked to the political, intra-agency questions of the place of StratCom within NATO because of the complex discursive environment in which it operates. NATO's 29 member states form a diverse linguistic community, with at times divergent interpretations of the StratCom language. Moreover, StratCom-related terms are introduced into, and used within, an institution with its own pre-existing linguistic culture.⁴ Terms that already have different meanings across the institutions of NATO can lead to misunderstandings and contribute to intra-institutional rivalries. *This project represents an exciting opportunity for NATO to become more effective in the implementation of its mission, while also actively shaping the burgeoning discipline of Strategic Communications.*

■ Language as an Expression of Institutional Culture

Communities define and distinguish themselves by cultivating a certain language use, creating a sense of shared identity.⁵ Not only can this create a feeling of belonging, but for those outside the community it becomes a basis for characterising and making value judgments about that in-group.

There are two main reasons why we should consider external language communities that interact with NATO language [national governments, civil society, other international institutions (EU, OECD, UN), media organisations, and academia]:

- When speaking to actors outside the NATO community, certain terms might not be understood in the same way, leading to misunderstandings.
- While a certain vocabulary might seem “natural” within NATO, it can sound alien, and even off-putting to outsiders. When using certain terms, it is important to consider how the use of language contributes to the impression of NATO.

The Terminology Project can thus help the NATO community to better manage its image. Raising awareness around how its members use language can in turn influence an outsider's perception of NATO.



THE METHODOLOGY

The Terminology Working Group convened several meetings in Riga and London throughout 2018. A robust methodology was deemed fundamental to the project. Group members remained sensitive to NATO doctrine. Terms were prioritized following an analysis of key terms in consultation with experts. Three assumptions guided the formulation of definitions.⁶ These principles form the basis of the methodology of this project.

- **Reality is a context. People inherit meaning. They do not have access to any other objective reality beyond the “reality” that language refers to.⁷ Signs and images are interpreted from within a conceptual framework that already comes with meanings and attached symbolic values.⁸ Likewise, it is impossible to define concepts independently of such a conceptual framework.** Definitions of terms are formulated systematically and analytically, but based on an understanding of the world and information flows as seen through a Strategic Communications lens. The perspective taken was frequently that of a nation-state engaged in Strategic Communication in pursuit of (geo) political interests.
- **Schemas are the basic building blocks of knowledge that make up this “reality”.** These “schemas” or conceptual frameworks can also be described as the templates for how we structure knowledge.⁹ **It is language that activates these schemas or frames in our brain and they are based on past knowledge and our physical experience of the world.¹⁰**
- **In-group/out-group selections play a vital role in shaping these “schemas” or “frames”. They underlie group-affiliations and are thus responsible for shaping social identities:** so-called in-group (the group one considers oneself to be part of) and out-groups (the groups one does not consider oneself to be part of).¹¹

Consistent with established terminology approaches, definitions were formulated or adapted according to “best practice” criteria: **simple, intuitive/predictable, affirmative and non-circular**. These principles were based on the original project proposal,¹² and agreed during discussions at the first Terminology Working Group meeting,¹³ while referencing similar terminology improvement projects.¹⁴

The philosophical (post-structural) and pragmatic, utilitarian approaches (based on pre-existing NATO language use and culture) to terminology were kept in conversation. There was a **continual discussion and negotiation between a more purist, theoretical, and systematic understanding of StratCom concepts, and the practical reality of NATO terminology** as it is and continues to be used in doctrine; consequently, throughout the NATO structure.



CHALLENGES AND TENSIONS

- NATO is a multilingual, politico-military organisation and StratCom-related language overlaps with the language of other political institutions (national governments, EU, UN). It further comes into contact with the commercial sector and academia as well as everyday language. **Boundaries are blurred not only between the terminology of agencies within NATO but also between a NATO-specific register and wider public discourse.**
- There are differences in the understanding and use of StratCom language across NATO member states, the military and political sides of NATO, and even across NATO's StratCom community. Potential for misunderstanding is compounded by the rotational nature of NATO posts and the diverse backgrounds of responsible officers.
- Policies and doctrines developed by NATO are created at different times and have different review cycles. For example, the NATO StratCom Policy dates back to 2009, whereas NATO Military StratCom Policy came into force in 2017. These documents also observe a hierarchical order, which makes it challenging to bring lower-level document up to date unless the same changes are made in the guiding document.
- The glossaries used for different NATO documents do not have a joint point of reference, some opting for the first meaning in the Oxford English Dictionary, some proposing definitions of their own, and some incorporating definitions from other NATO documents. **Hence there is lack of coherence even on some of the core terms. In addition, as far as the NATO StratCom domain is concerned, there is no one joint conceptual framework for terminology, pointing out the relationships between different terms and positioning them in a certain hierarchy.**



EXAMPLE OF PROJECT OUTPUTS



narrative, n.: Morals drawn from stories.

Background: *Narrative* has frequently been defined in ways that make it almost indistinguishable from *story*. Because its prolific and indiscriminate use has somewhat devalued *narrative* as a term, this working group sought to distance it as much as possible from definitions of *story*. Most definitions of *narrative* mention contingency, i.e. the linking of events and ideas into a sequence.¹⁷ However, the working group decided that contingency should be made an essential feature of *story* rather than *narrative*. *Narratives* should speak to the moral dimension of storytelling. The group agreed that narrative is communicated through stories, meaning that narrative is formed and maintained in human memory and stories are the way of conveying narrative to others, whereas scripts are ways of acting within the framework of a narrative. The confusion in the usage of 'narrative' and 'story' appears because narrative is expressed in the form of stories.

Rationale: The difficulties encountered when trying to describe the essential structural features of narratives that went beyond the Aristotelian description of Greek theatre, led to a definitional approach that focused on the key themes of a *narrative*. These were considered to be i) fostering understanding, ii) reducing complexity and, iii) offering a vision towards some sort of (achievable or non-achievable) end-state. All three of these aspects carry within them more or less explicit moral judgments: Who is the target audience for the narrative? What differences are brushed over, which ones are emphasised? For whom exactly is the offered end-state or vision desirable? A story, on the other hand, does not necessarily have to be offering a path toward a desired conclusion/vision that carries such judgments because it can be a simple account of events (e.g. a story about how I missed the bus in the morning).

In "The Narrative Construction of Reality"¹⁸ Bruner says that humans organise experience and memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative. He also emphasises that it is extremely difficult to distinguish what may be called the narrative mode of thought from the forms of narrative discourse since the structure of language and the structure of thought eventually become inextricable and it becomes pointless to say which is the more basic - the mental process or the discourse form that expresses it. **Example:** *Marxism* (workers of the world unite!).

Unlike stories or scripts the narrative of Marxism does not primarily tell a story (it does not emphasise a connected sequence of events) but instead suggest a desired end state. The narrative of Marxism calls for the unification of all workers of the world, but it does not spell out how exactly this should be achieved. The narrative has a moral dimension in that it singles out



"workers" as the desired in-group. Moreover, the call for unity implies that there is some antagonist or obstacle that workers must take a stance against (i.e. capitalist rule of the bourgeoisie).

However, unlike the proposed definition by the NATO Info Ops community describing 'narrative' as a 'written statement,' narratives might be articulated through speech or visuals. See for example Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech given on 28 August 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C.: <https://bit.ly/1LFkVm0>.



strategic communications, n.: A holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment.

Background: The political level 2009 definition of NATO Strategic Communications is considered dated by the majority of the StratCom community since it does not capture the mind-set of Strategic Communications. Although the latest NATO definition of "strategic communications" in MC 0628 NATO MILITARY POLICY ON STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS (2017) sought to find a definition that would not limit strategic communications to governments or military but allow it to be applicable in the nongovernmental sector and commercial world as well.

Rationale: Subject matter experts from NATO, academia, and the commercial sector agreed that 'holistic approach' would be an effective way of communicating the synchronised nature and 'mindset' element of strategic communications.

The definition of "strategic communications" is more than the sum of the single definitions for "strategic" (see working definition devised by the committee in footnote)¹⁵ and "communication"¹⁶). This is because the definition has to convey the following core features of "strategic communications": i) the understanding that everything we do communicates (words, deeds, and images); ii) the intention to affect and change attitudes, perceptions and behaviours; iii) the pursuit of high-level strategic goals. Additionally, the definition has to reflect that, in the modern day environment, strategic communications activities take place in an ever-changing, competitive environment. Moreover, it has to be clear from the definition that strategic communications is not simply a synonym for public affairs.

Example: The Marshall Plan (liberal economic ideas combined with economic aid and cultural/political appeal of American "way of life", which stood in stark contrast to planned economy Soviet Communism and political oppression).



GLOSSARY OF TERMS

The following terms were discussed and agreed in the Terminology Working Group sessions. These serve as a platform for appraising a further list of terms already identified.

communication, n.: The exchange of meaning.

conversation, n.: An oral and/or visual exchange between two or more individuals.

discourse, n.: Accepted positions that constrain debates and shape worldviews; they are created and maintained through communication.

hybrid threat, n.: A threat of mixed origin that avoids declaration of war and accountability.

influence, n.: The ability to achieve effects on opinions and behaviour through words, images and actions.

information, n.: *In strategic communications*, processed data.

N.B. *In NATO Intel Community*, unprocessed data (information does not become 'intelligence' until it is processed).

information environment, n.: Dynamic physical and/or virtual settings interpreted by the mind.

intended audience, n.: Selected individuals or groups to be influenced.

manoeuvre, n.: The employment of resources in the operating environment to achieve a position of advantage over an adversary.

meaning, n.: The product of coding and decoding of a message or information.

message, n.: A transmitted and/or consumed unit of information enriched with meaning.

N.B. Sometimes the receiver attributes the qualities of a message to a unit of information that was not intended as a message.

message environment, n.: A setting where interaction of messages affects the meaning of an event or phenomenon.

narrative, n.: Morals drawn from stories.

operating environment, n.: The dynamic setting that impacts decision-making and behaviour for achieving a given objective.

script, n.: Pattern of expectations shaped by experience and idealisation.

story, n.: A temporally, spatially, and causally connected sequence of events.

strategic communications, n.: A holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment.



Endnotes

- 1 P. J. J. Tiggelman, 'StratCom Terminology Improvement,' Project Submission Form: NATO StratCom COE Project of Work (October 2017), Authors: Dr. Neville Bolt, Leonie Haiden. Contributors to the Project: Iona Allan, Uku Arold, Beata Biały, Louis Brooke, MAJ Lars Flink, Olivia Griffiths, Julian Hajduk, Benjamin Heap, LTC Robert Hobbs, MAJ Stefan Langnau, LTC(Ret) Rita LePage, Gerry Osborne, MAJ(Ret) Serge Pelletier, Anna Reynolds, LTC Bernd Sölter, Peter Jan Tiggelman, LTC Māris Tūtins, LTC Andy Welsh, Twyla Williamson, LTC Rafał Zgzyzewicz
- 2 We cordially thank our working group members.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Roger Fowler and Gunter Kress, "Critical Linguistics," in *Language and Control*, eds. Fowler et al. (London; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 185.
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- 13 StratCom CoE, "StratCom Terminology Workshop- 15th-16th February 2018 Minutes".
- 14 Silvia Pavel and Diane Nolet, "Handbook of Terminology", Terminology and Standardization Translation Bureau, trans. Christine Leonhardt (Canada: Minister of Public Works and Government Services, 2001), 25-6.
- 15 Strategic – 'Identified overall aims and interests and how to advance them through comprehensive means.'
- 16 Communication – 'The exchange of meaning.'
- 17 Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, 5.
- 18 Bruner, *The Narrative Construction of Reality*, University of Chicago Press Journals, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Autumn, 1991), pp. 1-21





Operating since 2014, we have carried out significant research enhancing NATO nations' situational awareness of the information environment and have contributed to exercises and trainings with subject matter expertise.

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