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Communicating COVID-19: A Linguistic and Discursive
Approach across Contexts and Media

Comunicare il COVID-19: un approccio linguistico
e discorsivo a media e contesti

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Linguistic and Communicative Practices in the US Military's Response to the COVID-19 Emergency

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Abstract

There has been debate on the language used by the media and the government in communicating about the pandemic emergency (Kranert *et al.* 2020; Cardinale 2021; Kalkman 2021). One of the main criticisms lies in their extensive use of "military metaphors", a common trend in healthcare discourse (Nie *et al.* 2016; Parsi 2016). In truth, the US military avoids such aggressive language in favor of a more positive professional discursive approach (Parcell and Webb 2015), with greater focus on the support and implementation of clear, structured pandemic emergency plans. As a result, the military has managed to maintain its activity and a relatively low fatality rate while becoming a model of containment in certain areas (Nevitt 2020). The study will adopt the CADS (Corpus Assisted Discourse Analysis) methodology to analyze a corpus of military press articles and Department of Defense resources. It will draw qualitative insights on productive discourse patterns of military and governmental authorities, while empirically confirming or questioning such insights. In doing so, the study aims at highlighting alternative linguistic strategies that may be productively used in civilian emergency communication.

Keywords: Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis; COVID-19 emergency; emergency discourse; military communication; military news.

1. Military language, military practices and the COVID-19 emergency

The military's physical presence and communication – as well as its emulation – were commonly perceived on an international level during the initial phase of the COVID-19 emergency (Kranert *et al.* 2020; López-García 2020; Palavi *et al.* 2020; Kalkman 2021; Semino 2021) and its attempts to contain it. In fact, the military is trained to react swiftly and efficiently to unforeseen events on a regular basis. Such training not only enables them to deal with the situation, but also to somehow mitigate the general panic of the local population. The outbreak of the pandemic is no exception in this sense and resulted in the normalized presence and surveillance of military personnel throughout the most alarming and confusing period of the crisis.

An example in this sense may be provided by cursorily observing and comparing the meanings of the very word "crisis", which was frequently used to refer to the initial panic and inability to understand the pandemic and its implications, according to civilian (examples 1, 2, and 3), as opposed to military, perspectives (example 4):

(1) a situation or time that is very dangerous or difficult;
a deciding moment or turning-point (especially of an illness);
a time of great danger or difficulty. (*Cambridge Dictionary*, "crisis")

(2) a time of great danger, difficulty or doubt when problems must be solved or important decisions must be made;
a time when a problem, a bad situation or an illness is at its worst point. (*Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*, "crisis")

(3) the turning point for better or worse in an acute disease or fever;
a paroxysmal attack of pain, distress, or disordered function;
an emotionally significant event or radical change of status in a person's life;
the decisive moment (as in a literary plot);
an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending;
a situation that has reached a critical phase. (*Merriam-Webster*, "crisis")

(4) a very difficult or dangerous situation. (*Campaign Dictionary of Military Terms* 3rd ed., "crisis")
the act of taking rapid decisions to deal with a crisis. (*Campaign Dictionary of Military Terms* 3rd ed., "crisis management")

The definitions were chosen from popularized sources of definitions, in the cases of examples (1), (2), and (3), which are easily accessible for civilians and faithfully reflect common conceptions and perceptions of what a crisis consists of both in general and in this specific case. The fourth example is from a dictionary of military terms used to teach aspiring service members the meaning of specialized vocabulary in their professional context. The fact that a supposedly common word like "crisis" is included in this dictionary already implies that there could be a certain degree of deviation in this connotation compared to its "civilian" counterpart. While this is not clear in the definition of the word "crisis", it does become so upon seeing that it is immediately associated with the noun phrase "crisis management". This entry, or rather this procedure, specifically mentions the "act" that is executed to solve such a situation that is not found in any of the other definitions. The main distinctive element in military discourse, therefore, is that every crisis is something that can and must be managed and dealt with using the resources and protocols at one's disposal.

These reflections are confirmed by the name with which the military referred to the virus at the very beginning of the emergency that is used in the Department of Defense's initial memorandums and FAQs, i.e. "novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV)". This name is different from the terms "COVID-19" and "SARS-CoV-1/2" that have spread throughout the media to this day, and it also proves that COVID-19 was originally considered and referred to as a "novel" form of a preexisting class of viruses that had already circulated in the past and was therefore initially assumed to be just as containable and "manageable".

Other US military models and practices that have demonstrated their usefulness in making decisions and coping with the pandemic include:

1. Acquaintance with emergency management and emergency medicine (Parasidis 2015; Sarangi 2017; Nevitt 2020; Gibson-Fall 2021) in precarious situations, resulting in the establishment of precedents and protocols related to many of the parameters and bioethical choices that emerged during the first wave of COVID-19 (e.g., treatment with limited medical resources and within a hostile environment, choosing who to cure based on their chances of survival, reduced decisional power of patients in medical matters).

2. Implementation of mission command doctrine in hospitals (Pearce *et al.* 2021) based on clear expression of intent and the flattening of hierarchy in clinical decision making through protocols founded on the unity of effort, freedom of action, trust, mutual understanding

and rapid decision making that are typical of the military community's values.

3. Easy-to-remember abbreviations and related protocols, including the command, control, communication (Hutchings *et al.* 2021) and 3 W's, i.e. 'What happened?', 'What are you doing about it?', 'What does it mean to me?' (Tetteh 2020) approaches that are implemented to gain necessary intelligence.

4. Use of modified military visual signals to communicate and efficiently execute surgical procedures while wearing protective equipment (Sánchez-Hernández *et al.* 2020).

5. Introduction and enforcement of HPCON (Health Protection Condition) levels, a Department of Defense Public Health Emergency Management policy enforced by the WHS (Washington Headquarters Services), which had already been used during previous disease outbreaks. It consists in a "color code" of five levels where each color, ranging from the green of "routine" to the red of "delta" for severe risks, indicates the level of risk and type of precautions that must be taken to prevent the community transmission of a health threat. This code is similar in names (substituting "routine" with "normal"), but does not use the same sequence of colors, as the FPCON (Force Protection Condition) levels. More importantly, the three most serious levels of the HPCON (yellow "Bravo" for "moderate" threats, orange "Charlie" for "substantial" threats, and red "Delta" for severe threats) were introduced in other countries, and even other regions (like in the case of Italy), to clearly communicate the current state of the virus in a determined area.

As a result, the civilian population also adopted – or emulated – the discourse of a professional community that conveys a sense of potential problem-solving. However, international crises and emergencies are not the only situations that trigger such a semantic adjustment. The adoption of terms coined and used by the military has also been extensively verified and researched in medical discourse (Khullar 2014; Nie *et al.* 2016; Parsi 2016; Hendricks *et al.* 2018; Doerr 2019b). In fact, lexical choices such as "battle/war against cancer", "patient/fighter", "to attack the disease with medicine", or "monitor for insidious disease" vividly express strength, resistance and perseverance in the face of a deadly threat that is just as dangerous as that encountered in the battlefield. From this perspective,

> war metaphors are pervasive in public discourse and span a wide range of topics because they provide a very effective structural framework for communicating and thinking about abstract and complex topics. [...] In

the special case of the diseases, the war metaphor is typically used to frame the situation relatively to the treatment of the disease. (Wicke and Bolognesi 2020)

In these cases, the military is seen as a provider of protocols, guidelines and instructions regarding the use of resources and tools which are referred to using a specialized language. Proof of its success lies in the fact that the military has managed to maintain its activity and a relatively low fatality rate, and even become a model of containment in certain areas throughout the emergency. Along with its support to domestic emergency relief operations (Nevitt 2020), the US Department of Defense and the branches of the military have collaborated with prestigious medical institutions to track and publish data on the pandemic's effect on the military and constantly inform the military community on responses, executive orders, ongoing research and support programs, while giving specific instructions on how to avoid spreading rumors and myths on COVID-19. Nevertheless, military terms in a strict sense differ from the meaning and use of military language in the media (Parcell and Webb 2015; Anthony 2018). In fact, whereas military terms are originally and currently used within the military professional community to define a precise figure or procedure, military – or rather, "militarized" – language is used in an abstract manner to create a strong impact on its audience.

The present study intends to explore and verify the validity of this specific use of language in association with the COVID-19 outbreak to provide an overview on the US military's alternative framing of and approach to communication relating to emergencies. Such a perspective is of interest for linguistics, as its inquiry and illustration have the intent of debunking common myths on and contestations of the use of military language in relation to healthcare crises and threats while contributing to the ever-growing body of research on (dis)information on health risks and practices. The next section will present the aims, methodology and aspects that were considered in the present study. This will be followed by the presentation of the dataset and the reasoning underlying the selection and creation of the corpus. At this point, the analysis of the collected military news and resources will be executed and then reflected upon in the final section where the answers to the research questions, along with resulting considerations, will be detailed.

2. Aims and methodology

As mentioned, language that is commonly attributed to the military due to the origin of its terms has been appropriated and used by civilians and in the media in cases of severe emergencies in general and, more specifically, in reference to the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak. This was, in fact, a period in which uncertainty and fear was at their highest, and where authority and answers were most sought out. To verify whether such an adoption was executed appropriately and if it had the same effect, the first research question focuses on analyzing news by the "experts" of reaction to large-scale emergencies:

> *RQ1: Does the military press make use of the same figurative language as its civilian counterparts when referring to COVID-19?*

The second research question is related to, and more specifically focuses on, the approach of the military by means of the following inquiry:

> *RQ2: How does the military press portray the COVID-19 emergency and response?*

In order to answer these questions, and due to the connotative nature of their implications, a combination of qualitative and quantitative data findings must be gathered and explored in detail. For this reason, Corpus Assisted Discourse Studies (Baker 2004; Garzone and Santulli 2004; O'Keeffe and McCarthy 2010) was considered the most appropriate approach. In fact, given the widespread situation that the military had to deal with, as well as the significant amount of information, news and rules that were circulating on an international level at the start of the emergency, quantitative data provides information on the entity of such extensive data in an attempt to distinguish emerging trends and frequent choices. In contrast, qualitative data allows specific lexical and discursive choices and their occurrence to be analyzed and interpreted without any risk of misunderstandings due to conglomerate uses. The AntConc 3.5.8. (2019) corpus analysis software was used, as it allowed specific aspects, i.e. keywords, collocations, and concordances, to be detected and scrutinized by specifically focusing on article titles, wordlists, clusters, and concordances containing essential keywords, and on their use within the dataset, which will be presented in section 3.

Such findings from the corpus will be integrated where necessary with the Department of Defense (DoD)'s memorandums representing

samples of official military writing and policies which address both the military and civilian communities. In fact, the DoD has extensively contributed to allaying fears and questions by the civilian population, as well as service members, by uploading and updating a series of freely accessible guides and resources that inform on the following areas: civilian personnel guidance; defense industrial base; elective surgery; force health protection guide; general guidance; health protection condition levels; military personnel guidance; moving in a COVID-19 environment; pentagon personnel; secretary of defense, vaccine guide.

3. Dataset

The dataset of the present study consists in a corpus composed of 165 articles (11632 types, 207677 tokens) that were searched and gathered by using the Lexis Nexis databank and inserting the search terms "military + COVID-19". The sources of the articles belong to the military press, both in general and in relation to specific branches of the armed forces (i.e. *Inside the Air Force*, *Air Force Times*, *Marine Corps Times*, *Armed Forces Journal*, *Navy Times*, *Inside the Navy*, *Inside the Army*, *Army Times*, *Military Times Edge*, *Military Supplements*, *Defense & Foreign Affairs' Strategic Policy*, *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, *Inside Defense SITREP*, *Homeland Defense Watch*, *Defense News*) to gain an overall perception of the military's response to and perception of the COVID-19 pandemic.

   The selected articles were all written between January 6, 2020 and May 14, 2021, as this was the initial period of the emergency in which the military was most active in the civilian and public healthcare environment. It was also the time in which military language was extensively used also in civilian contexts before the register in the media began to be duly mitigated due to both awareness of the effect of panic-provoking discourse and a greater understanding of COVID-19 and the manners and measures that may counteract the spread of the virus. Because the focus of the study is on the direct intervention or assistance of the military in response to the pandemic, any articles that only mentioned, but were not directly related to, the US army were excluded from the dataset. This included articles in which the discovery or project at hand was essentially of an academic or civilian nature but followed the example or openly referred to military protocols and projects.

This narrowed selection was necessary to provide the most "military-oriented" portrayal of the outbreak of the COVID-19 emergency possible and glean insight into how the professional expertise of the military producers and audiences of these texts informs and influences their form. Such findings, in turn, make it easier to underline differences between this alternative approach to the communication of emergencies and the general civilian approach that has been extensively studied since the beginning of 2020.

Now that the aims, methodology and dataset of the study have been outlined, section 4 will make use of the tools of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis to expound on the specific peculiarities of military emergency-focused communication and management.

4. Analysis of military news

The present analytical section of the study will be divided into subsections based on specific aspects where the distinctive approach of the armed forces and its culture to international emergencies is most obvious. These consist in the titles of the articles and wordlists of the most commonly employed terms, clusters incorporating the term "COVID(-19)", concordances of "COVID-19" with lexical associations that were frequently present in civilian news and media, and the use of modal verbs and markers of support/obligation. A subsection will therefore be dedicated to each of these aspects.

4.1. *Article titles*

The first visible macro element that emerges in a news article is its title, whose phrasing and framing has the intent of piquing readers' interest and getting them to read as much of the content of the article as possible. In this sense, the analysis of the titles of military articles led to insight on their similarities and differences compared to civilian news on the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first aspect of the titles to be observed consisted in their use of verb tenses and syntactic structure, which follows the rules of civilian news titles like in examples (5a), (5b) and (5c):

(5)
(a) "Pentagon <u>Continues</u> to Seek Billions in Pandemic-Related Costs";
    "Biden Defense Budget <u>Takes</u> Political Hits Left and Right".
(b) "DOD Leaders <u>to Meet</u> Next Week win Industry Executives"; "USAF
    <u>to Finalize</u> Next JASSM-ER Order in March, Buy Newer Variant
    Later".
(c) "Smith '<u>Deeply Concerned</u>' Over Delayed budget"; "Hicks Sets New
    '<u>Governance Structure</u>' to Run Pentagon Processes".

To make them short and impactful, the titles of the articles may adhere
to a series of consolidated practices that are also found in civilian jour-
nalism. The first of these is to use present tenses, like in example 5a,
with the verbs "continues" and "takes", to convey a sense of currentness
and updatedness. The second strategy, which is used in reference to
future events, uses the immediately recognizable "to + infinitive" forms
like "to meet" and "to finalize" in (5b). The final strategy is to have the
referred authority "intervene" and complete part of the title with the
main keywords contained in the article. These rules have the intent of
adhering to well-known genre conventions that make the selection and
comprehension of the article simpler and more enjoyable for the reader.

However, the qualitative study of the article titles also led to the
observation of various aspects in which the military news articles on
COVID-19 differed from the mainstream press. The first of these may
be traced back to the military culture's need (Doerr 2019a) to clearly
assess and measure the entity of the emergency at hand in order to
work out a plan of action and deal with it efficiently using the resources
at its disposal. More precisely, it consists in the practice of commit-
tedly specifying any quantification of costs, setbacks and changes in
plans. As opposed to civilian media, whose vagueness in numbers and
deadlines had the intent of gaining time until decisions were made on
a governmental level and/or of not committing to figures and dates in a
period of uncertainty, these titles state precise costs and deadlines even
at the institution's expense, as may be seen in the clear indication of
"six-months", "\$10.5B" and "\$11B" respectively in examples (6a), (6b),
and (6c):

(6)
(a) "Pandemic Forces <u>Six-Month Delay</u> to MDA Plans for LRDR Initial
    Fielding".
(b) "DOD Details Spending Plan for <u>\$10.5B</u> in COVID-19 Relief Funds".
(c) "DOD Still Seeking <u>\$11B</u> Supplemental to Cover Contractors'
    Pandemic Costs".

Accordingly, the military news articles are just as clear in announcing successes that occurred in the attempt to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic as they are in revealing any remaining insecurities. Even in the initial phase of the emergency there is no fear of disclosing the presence or intervention of vulnerable processes or parts of an organization. In the military culture in fact, it is fundamental for all members to be aware of potential dangers and to train or plan so as to avoid or pose a remedy to them. Providing information on delicate manners or issues to be solved is a manner of promoting mission readiness and preparing for possible complications, as in the examples below:

(7)
(a) "DOD <u>Reviewing</u> of Aircraft during Protests".
(b) "Hyten: COVID-19 Pandemic <u>Exposed</u> 'Weak' Defense Supply Chains".
(c) "COVID-19 <u>Slowing Down</u> Lockheed's F-16 Block 70/72 FMS Program".

News that would therefore be considered alarming in civilian contexts (here present in "reviewing during protests", "exposed weak supply chains" and "slowing down programs") is seen as necessary for the entire community. The strong hierarchy of the military culture, represented by the chain of command, along with its stark communitarianism have led to the perception that everyone must be constantly updated, and that it is better to be informed on everything, worrying news included, rather than wait for reassuring updates, in order to duly prepare and respond.

The first of these three aspects regarding article titles is typical of newswriting in general, while the other two are distinctive of information in the military community and share the need to be as clear and unambiguous as possible. Even in cases of emergencies – and indeed, even more so in such cases – it is important to provide clear facts and figures, not so as to challenge them but rather in order to monitor the situation and any subsequent plans and protocols.

4.2. *Wordlist of frequent hits*

More insight into writing by and for the military community may be gleaned by focusing on the most frequent words used in these news pieces. One of the main criticisms against how the media communicated with the population about the progression of the COVID-19 crisis during its initial phases consisted in the use of excessively connotative

language, coupled with the previously mentioned vagueness and non-committal approach towards dates and figures. To verify whether this were the case for military news as well, a table (*Tab. 1*) with the most frequent words in the dataset is presented below.

Table 1. – Most common words (number of hits) in the dataset.
Source: Author's elaboration.

RANK	FREQUENCY	WORD
1	1707	defense
2	999	said
3	965	military
4	813	COVID(-19); 210 for "coronavirus"
5	639	new
6	545	strategic
7	533	DOD
8	506	policy
9	463	government
10	461	industry
11	393	national
12	372	war
13	355	security
14	325	pentagon
15	324	other
16	305	Trump
17	164	end
18	287	global
19	285	spending
20	282	pandemic

The first feature to emerge upon narrowing the list down to the 20 most frequent words in the dataset lies in its "institutional" and denotative nature. As opposed to the titles which, as previously underlined, maintain their "eye catching" and "newsworthy" quality despite being more factual than civilian headlines, the content of these articles is

substantially objective and informative: there are frequent references to the "DOD", "government", "industry" and "pentagon", and fewer words indicating emotion, and therefore anything concerning a subjective outcome. In fact, many of the words are "functional", in that they may serve as both nouns and adjectives: such is the case of "defense", "military", and "pandemic". Moreover, the full-fledged adjectives "new", "strategic", and "global" are already integrated into the community's professional vocabulary. This gives the news and updates concerning the COVID-19 "crisis" a stronger sense of being something "already seen" and therefore completely manageable by means of the military's "crisis management" implementations.

4.3. *Clusters with "COVID(-19)"*

Another use of lexis from a military culture-oriented perspective may be analyzed starting from the term "COVID-19" within clusters in the database of military articles. In fact, as mentioned in the introduction, the virus was first referred to with its initial nomenclature "novel coronavirus" or "2019-nCoV", which put it on the same level as previous outbreaks of other coronaviruses like SARS. In accordance with what has been observed in subsection 4.2, the most common clusters are highly denotative in tone and content (*Fig. 1*).

The cluster that perhaps draws most attention and, even seems to contradict what was previously stated in relation to the lack of common metaphors depicting COVID-19 as a battle, is "COVID-19 wars" (Garzone 2021; Semino 2021). Upon closer inspection, it was revealed that these 8 hits were present in the extra DOD documents and not in the articles. Moreover, this cluster was neither a metaphor, nor a phrasing within any of the articles, but rather consisted in 8 references to an article entitled "The COVID-19 Wars: Strategic Warfare Amid Chaos, Threat, Opportunity". Even this title, albeit containing the word "wars", takes on a somewhat comforting connotation by means of the three-part list "chaos, threat, opportunity" which reflects the approach and steps of the military in facing emergencies. The pandemic in fact presents itself as "chaos", so long as it is unpredictable and unknown, but is then assessed and labelled as a "threat" to be dealt with following the consolidated emergency protocol, and later reconceived as an "opportunity" thanks to the data and lessons that were acquired throughout the experience. As a result, in this sense it is possible to confirm the

"neutrality" of the information that was conveyed by the military on the COVID-19 emergency during its initial outbreak.

Rank	Freq	Range	Cluster
2	152	2	covid-19 coronavirus
3	90	2	covid coronavirus
4	54	2	covid-19 pandemic
5	26	2	covid-19 outbreak
6	25	2	covid-19 pandemic
7	24	2	covid-19 crisis
8	21	2	covid coronavirus
9	21	2	covid-19 coronavirus
10	15	2	covid-19 response
11	12	2	covid-19 crisis
12	12	2	covid-19 page
13	9	2	covid-19 client
14	9	1	covid-19 shutdowns
15	8	1	covid-19 wars
16	7	1	covid-19 inside
17	7	1	covid-19 stimulus
18	6	1	covid relief
19	6	1	covid-19 could
20	5	1	covid-19 outbreak

Concordance | Concordance Plot | File View | Clusters/N-Grams | Collocates | Word List | Keyword List
Total No. of Cluster Types 226   **Total No. of Cluster Tokens** 988

Figure 1. – Clusters/N-Grams (AntConc 3.5.8.) with "COVID-19" in the dataset.
Source: Author's elaboration.

4.4. *Concordances and collocations*

In light of the findings above, the question that naturally followed was whether there was any use of words connected to combat and COVID-19 such as the ones that had been frequently employed in the civilian news media, especially during the initial outbreak of the pandemic. The next step therefore consisted in analyzing the presence and use of terms such as war*, battle* and fight* in the dataset. This was

done by employing the "concordancing" function of the Antconc 3.5.8. software and observing the presence of words to the left and right of the combat-oriented node at hand. Each of the three words led to different variations of the same answer to the question regarding their use to refer to the COVID-19 emergency (*Fig. 2*).
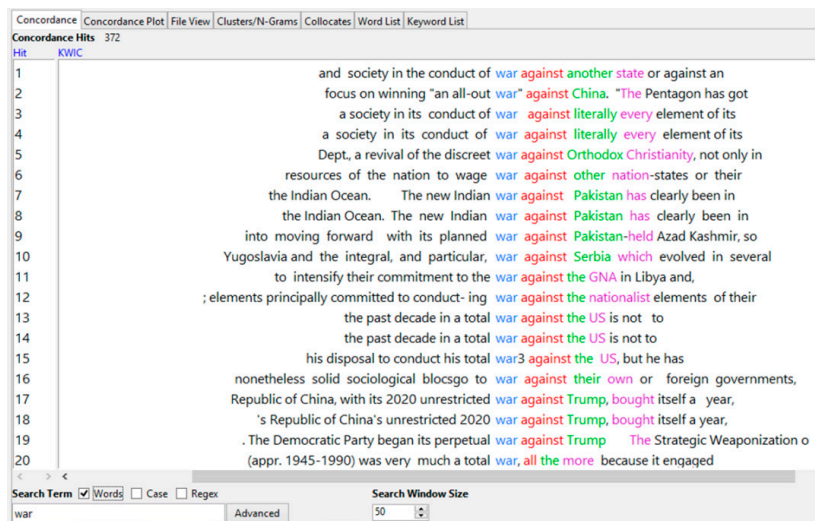

Figure 2. – Concordances with war* (AntConc 3.5.8.) in the dataset.
Source: Author's elaboration.

The first term to be considered, i.e. war*, was most often used in the collocation "war against" and often preceded by a verb (e.g. "wage", "planned", "conducting") or an adjective (e.g. "discreet", "total", "perpetual", "unrestricted"). In addition, the wars that are mentioned are either geopolitical, and therefore against a certain country, or purely political in the case of internal conflicts against political or socio-religious factions because of the emergency, but never referred to the sphere of healthcare. In fact, for the military profession war is something that is not only well-known and trained for, but also clearly defined and mapped out, as opposed to non-military and unrelated members of society, who are prone to use the word "war" in a metaphorical sense.

The second word, i.e. battle*, pertains to the same word category and semantic field (*Fig. 3*).
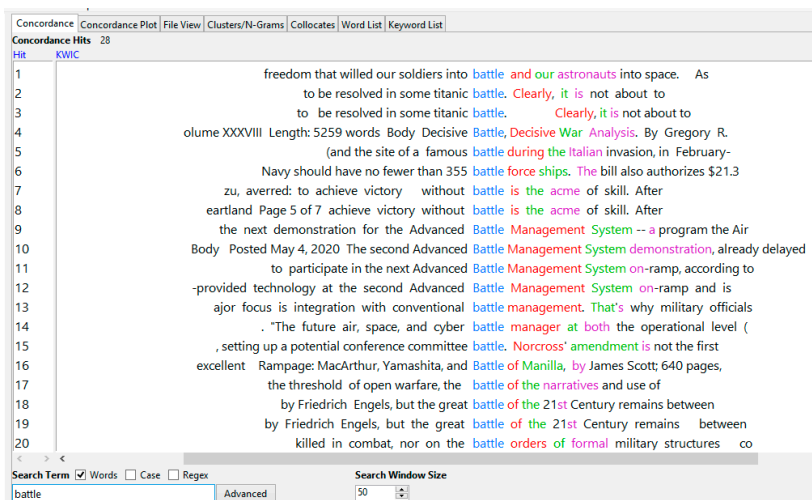
Figure 3. – Concordances with battle* (AntConc 3.5.8.) in the dataset.
Source: Author's elaboration.

As the concordances above demonstrate, battle* is either used to refer to specific historical events (e.g. "the battle of Manila"), programs and processes (e.g. "Battle Management System", "battle orders"), or to conflict in general and in a conceptual-metaphorical sense (e.g. "titanic battle", "battle of the narratives", "battle of the 21st century"). The COVID-19 emergency is not considered on the same level as a real battle to be fought here, even if it is a threat to be taken seriously.

The third and final node to be considered may be both a verb and a noun, i.e. fight*, whose inquiry led to the results in *Figure 4*.

In this case, the most common collocation is "fight (for) something" followed by the name of the conflict or its objective, thus implying that there is a precise intent and strategy at hand. This is also in line with military patriotic values and the military community's attachment to history, but again not used in reference to the ongoing pandemic.

In conclusion, the observation of three common terms related to war and used as nodes in the dataset reveals that conflict-related vocabulary is usually employed in a specific or in a historical-patriotic sense in the military press, even that concerning COVID-19. By doing so, the military community seems to draw on past experience and the lessons learned on those occasions to face present and future threats. This

would also explain its treatment of the pandemic as yet another crisis that can and must be managed in order to gain even more insight to be used in future emergencies.

Figure 4. – Concordances with fight* (AntConc 3.5.8.) in the dataset. Source: Author's elaboration.

4.5. *Modal verbs and markers of support/obligation*

The last lexical area to be considered in the present attempt to better understand military communication on the outbreak of the COVID-19 emergency lies in that of markers of modality of support and/or obligation. Interestingly, these are areas that could debunk popular misconceptions on the military by the civilian population. In fact, it is commonly and simplistically believed that, due to its high power distance and strong hierarchy, the military is characterized by a one-way top-bottom flow of information and order. Therefore, "[t]he parallel to the challenge of military command is obvious. However, popular misconceptions of how military command operates emphasise coercion (orders/punishment) and centralised command" (Pearce *et al.* 2021, 3). This leads to the expectation that deontic modal verbs indicating obligation will prevail, which was verified by using the AntConc software to count the rank and frequency of modal verbs (*Tab. 2*).

Table 2. – Most common modal verbs (number of hits) in the dataset.
Source: Author's elaboration.

RANK	FREQUENCY	WORD
1	715	will
2	589	would
3	315	could
4	268	can
5	212	may
6	138	need to
7	114	should
8	100	going to
9	78	must
10	55	have to
11	43	might
12	37	be able to

The data presented in *Table 2* demonstrates that epistemic modal verbs were much more common and occupy the first 5 positions. As a result, there is greater emphasis on modal verbs referring to planning, predicting outcomes and potential rather than obligation. This is in line with the military's focus on implementing and adjusting its policies and practices based on the development and outcomes of their application of pre-existing protocols to emergencies at hand. Such findings are even more marked upon considering and measuring the impact of words connected to support and/or orders in the dataset, as underlined in *Table 3*.

Table 3. – Lexical markers of support and obligation (number of hits) in the dataset.
Source: Author's elaboration.

RANK	FREQUENCY	WORD
1	218	support
2	108	command
3	76	order
4	76	task
5	60	help
6	7	assist

Here as well, the data demonstrates that there are more than double the hits for "support" than for "command", "order" and "task", all four of which are used as both nouns and adjectives. The priority is therefore that of ensuring the stability of present and functioning, as well as promising and under-trial, policies rather than simply enforcing stale obligations and orders. It also denotes a certain degree of flexibility that is not generally attributed to the military from the outside but is fundamental in dealing with the complexities and contingencies that are involved in an emergency.

5. Conclusions and future research

In the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, civilians used language that was associated with the military (and therefore perceived ideas like strength, readiness and defense) to refer to required reactions. This was later frowned upon due to the panic that such perceived aggressive discourse triggered in combination with the vagueness of the mainstream press. It is therefore possible to claim that the discourse of emergency lies within a field of professional interdiscursivity (Sarangi 2005; Bhatia 2010; Garzone 2020) that involved the military and its view on medical and political discourse in this specific case. This led to the foundational research question of whether the military does the same in its media to motivate service members, which was framed as follows: *RQ1: Does the military press make use of the same figurative language as its civilian counterparts when referring to COVID-19?* The present study has demonstrated that this is not the case. In fact, there are no war-oriented metaphors in the military article titles and content, and there is very little – when present – metaphorical use of words pertaining to the semantic field of bellical and military activity (here represented by war*, battle*, and fight*), as well as of the word "crisis". This because such terms are an actual denotative part of the military profession and refer to very specific entities and practices, as opposed to civilian discourse, where they take on an abstract – and therefore more alarming – quality.

This led to the second research question: *RQ2: How does the military press portray the COVID-19 emergency and response?*, resulting in a twofold answer. On the one hand, the articles' titles employ journalistic writing strategies to be interesting. On the other hand, they differ in

their specificity of figures and times and their desire to be clear and committed towards the positive and negative progress of ongoing measures and plans. This may be traced back to the fact that the military mainly focuses on assessment of damage and response to provide a solution. Moreover, the news is much more denotative and "specialized" in register compared to civilian news to avoid sensationalism. Military language in the press reflects military culture and standards of procedure surrounding discourse and threats, and the COVID-19 emergency is no exception in this sense. A further point of divergence – one that also defies common misconceptions of the workings of the military community – lies in its priority to support, rather than to command, and its focus on foreseeing and learning from experience rather than enforcing preconceived structures.

In conclusion, the present study contributes to research on discourse during and on the COVID-19 emergency, as it provides an alternative discursive and linguistic model that could provide insight into how to improve communication on emergencies and prevent some of the misgivings and distrust that resulted from the media's sensationalism and lack of clarity. In the future it could certainly be integrated with further research on the manner with which such discourse has progressed – or remained the same – throughout the pandemic and on parallel studies to verify whether there were any differences in military communication based on the employed media of communication or armed force and its related degree/role of involvement in the containment and resolution of the emergency.

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