

Abbreviations and acronyms in military English

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As a language teacher, interpreter, and translator I have met problems presented by the use (and misuse) of abbreviations many times. In the present article I wish to make an effort to categorise various abbreviations used in military English, highlight the tendencies in this field of special language and find out general guidelines. The examples in the present study paper are taken from of both general and special military English in order to illustrate the nature of and current trends in development of abbreviations and acronyms.

A brief historic overview

Without going too deep in the “prehistory” of abbreviations it can be stated that they are products of literacy. Egyptian hieroglyphs – particularly those dated back to the period of Old Kingdom – can easily be interpreted as abbreviations as long as those are regarded as symbols of words without indicating the phonetic features of their pronunciation.

Since abbreviations and acronyms come from letter-based scripts it is reasonable to focus on their predecessors. Abbreviation **SPQR**, well known from the time of the Roman Empire stands for **Senatus Populusque Romanus** (“The Senate and the People of Rome” or “The Senate and Roman People”). It appears on coins, at the end of documents made public by inscription in stone or metal, in dedications of monuments and public works and even in the modern coat of arms of the city of Rome.

Abbreviation **INRI** (**I**esus **N**azarenus **R**ex **I**udæorum – (Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews) that Pontius Pilate had written over the head of Jesus Christ on the cross – also dates back to ancient times.

Anno Domini (Medieval Latin: in the year of Our Lord), abbreviated as **AD** or **A.D.**, is a designation used to number years both in the Julian and Gregorian calendars. More fully, years may be also specified as *Anno Domini Nostri Iesu (Jesu) Christi* (“In the Year of Our Lord Jesus Christ”). However, **BC** or **B.C.** (Before Christ), used for numbering years before our era is of English origin, clearly indicating the lack of logic in English.

Received: June 9, 2010

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Usage

As it has been indicated in the Introduction above, abbreviations are not the products of the 20th Century. However, by now they have grown wide spread both in spoken and written English. It is fairly easy to understand a sentence like:

“Is there an ATM near here?”

or

“This TDI BMW has an ABS”

Abbreviations may be gaining ground in every language because they accelerate communication as they are clear and time saving.

In fact, however, clarity is not always easy to realise. The abbreviation in the sentence below can stand for various expressions and not even the context helps with understanding the message.

“He used to work for RAF.”

Royal Air Force? Rochester Advertising Federation? Or maybe Red Army Faction? Such an abbreviation can only be decoded by insiders and for people not belonging to a certain community it will be rather difficult to understand the message.

The frequency of abbreviations and acronyms in military English is even higher and to interpret or understand them is nearly impossible for outsiders.

“Advancing IFVs and APCs were covered with fire of supporting MBTs.”

That is: Advancing Infantry Fighting Vehicles and Armoured Personnel Carriers were covered with fire of supporting Main Battle Tanks.

In my analysis I grouped abbreviations in the following categories:

Syllabic abbreviations, in which letters make up new words:

laser	Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation
radar	Radio Detection And Ranging
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
scuba	Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus
SAR	Search and Rescue
HUD	Head up Display
NAC	North-Atlantic Council
FEBA	Forward Edge of Battle Area
SHAPE	Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe
CONOPS	Concept of Operations

Initialisms/alphabetisms, in which letters are pronounced separately:

ICBM	I ntercontinental B allistic M issile
wmd	w eapons of m ass d estruction
SOMTC	S taff O fficers' M ilitary T erminology T raining
MLTC	M ilitary L anguage T raining C entre
RPG	R ocket P ropelled G renade
ILS	I nstrumental L anding S ystem

A unique element of this group is **RPG** coming from Russian and borrowed by English. Although it has a slightly different meaning in the two languages, Ruchnoy Protivotankovyy Granatomyot in Russian, and Rocket Propelled Grenade in English its pronunciation is similar and so is its denotatum.

Abbreviated abbreviations:

In such abbreviations a usually wide spread and well known meaning is marked by the first letter:

NRF	N ATO R eaction F orce
NDC	N ATO D efence C ollege

Abbreviations consisting of acronyms

These abbreviations are partly pronounced by letters and partly as words thanks to their syllabic elements.

JSOC	J unior S taff O fficers C ourse
GBAD	G round- B ased A ir D efence
C3	C ommand, C ontrol, and C ommunication
2iC	S econd i n C ommand
KFOR	K osovo F orce

Non-pronounced abbreviations

Abbreviations of military ranks, written instructions and indications fall into this category. It should be noted here that often there is a significant difference between British and American abbreviations of military ranks.

iaw	i n a ccordance w ith
PTO	p lease t urn o ver

LTC/Lt Col **lieutenant colonel**

Lt **lieutenant**

CPT/Capt **captain**

Abbreviated forms of measurements also fall into this group as they are not used in spoken English. This equally refers to metric (SI) and imperial systems of measurements:

SI system Imperial system

km,	kilometre	mi, ml, m	mile
dl,	decilitre	fl oz	fluid ounce
kph	kilometre per hour	mph, kn/kt	mile per hour/ knot
kV	kilovolt		
mW	milliwatt		
MW	megawatt		
MHz	megahertz		
GB	gigabyte		

It may not need any specific explanations why the last five measurements – products of the last centuries – have no counterparts in the imperial system.

Most probably **METAR**, consisting of meteorological reports, is the most typical example of unpronounced abbreviations, numbers, and measurements in military English.

METAR LHDC 151345Z 05008KT 9999 SCT026 OVC083 03/02 Q1005 NOSIG=

That is at the Debrecen airport on the 15th of current month at 13:45 the wind speed was 15 kph, and the wind direction was north-east. Visibility was over 10 kilometres. In the airspace of the airport scattered clouds were seen at 2,600 feet (800 metres) and it is overcast at 8,300 feet (2,400 metres). The air pressure was 1005 Hectopascals and no significant changes were expected.

Backronyms

The so called backronyms are products of folklore in English too. Backronyms are based on existing abbreviations or company names by distorting their original meanings.

Ford = **Fix or repair daily**

NATO = **No Action, Talk Only**

SHAPE = **Superb Holidays At Public Expenses**

MOAB = **Mother Of All Bombs** (eredetileg: Massive Ordnance Air Blast Bomb)

NASA = **Need Another Seven Astronauts** – after the space shuttle disasters (originally: National Aeronautics and Space Administration)

Pseudo-acronyms

This type of acronyms is not typical for military English but on the basis of the speed of their gaining ground in English language the appearance of this trend cannot be excluded from this field either.

Q8, Kuwait
ICQ I seek you
IOU I owe you

Writing

As it can frequently be experienced the correct way of writing abbreviations generates problems not only for language students but also for native speakers of English.

In the case of acronyms – if they are in use in everyday communication – lower case is the most frequent:

laser
scuba

Spelled abbreviations are normally written in upper case:

AK Avtomat **K**alashnikova
USA United States of **A**merica
NBC **n**uclear, **b**iological, **c**hemical
ETA **e**stimated **t**ime of **a**rrival
ETD **e**stimated **t**ime of **d**eparture

Prepositions in abbreviations and acronyms are usually marked with lower case letters (if they are marked at all). The abbreviation of prepositions is to make pronunciation easier.

ToT **t**ime **o**n **t**arget
AOR/AoR, **a**rea **o**f **r**esponsibility
CoS **C**hief **o**f **S**taff

If an abbreviation is pronounceable without the abbreviation of the preposition marked in it, the preposition is not abbreviated.

USA United States of **A**merica
ETA **e**stimated **t**ime of **a**rrival
ETD **e**stimated **t**ime of **d**eparture
F.B.I. **F**ederal **B**ureau of **I**nvestigation

Punctuation

The use of punctuation in military English abbreviations is not regulated – similarly to other fields of English usage. The latest trend is to introduce periods. This would indicate a letter-based pronunciation and ease orientation for both native speakers and non-native language learners. Thus the correct way of abbreviation would be:

F.B.I. **F**ederal **B**ureau of **I**nvestigation

U.K. **U**nited **K**ingdom

M.o.D. **M**inistry of **D**efence

The use of conditional is justified in the sentence above since it is extremely difficult to change or modify a way of spelling already embedded in modern use.

There is no consensus in marking plural either. In accordance with current trends the form without apostrophe is becoming increasingly wide spread. If this type of spelling becomes generally used it makes differentiation between plurals and possessives easier.

For example: **MBTs** versus **MBT's**

APCs versus **APS's**

Frequently it is the pronunciation of abbreviations that poses the biggest problems. Sometimes even for native speakers of English. As a thumb rule it can be stated that a tendency to simplicity is present in every language (even if it is not always clear for a language learner) therefore abbreviations are usually used as acronyms:

AAA (triple A),

FLTC (flets)

At the same time differences in pronunciation are reflected in differences in spelling too.

IRA (I.R.A. = Irish Republican Army versus IRA (ira = Individual Retirement Account)

How to learn abbreviations and acronyms

Beyond a certain level of command of English it is absolutely necessary to learn about the nature of abbreviations as it is absolutely necessary to make language learners aware of the fact that abbreviations are an integral part of military English. It is important to know that basically anybody can produce abbreviations if they take into consideration the rules and characteristics mentioned above. Otherwise there is no information exchange therefore there is no communication.

It is paramount to know, that temporary abbreviations are fairly wide spread in military English, mainly because of the high number of exercises which include various

scenarios of fictive conflict situations and crises. Since these events are short-term training courses the abbreviations generated by and related to them are similarly short lived.

Thus it is not surprising that the overwhelming majority of abbreviations change quickly and they are not worth to learn. This is clearly indicated by the glossaries or abbreviation lists issued by various organisations, offices and institutes, or by the list of abbreviations at the end of study papers and articles. Authors of such study papers, official letters, reports, memoranda, etc. are therefore required to introduce abbreviations used by them so that communication cannot be broken.

Naturally, spoken English also uses plenty of abbreviations. However, their overuse is to be avoided, particularly in communication among representatives of different arms and services. On the other hand standard communication in nearly all fields of military English, e.g. air traffic control, consists mostly of an extensive use of abbreviations as they help save precious time and reduce chances of miscommunication generated by the incorrect usage by non-native speakers of English.

Conclusion

Abbreviations are used both in general and military English. They are frequently ambiguous and impossible to decipher without proper knowledge of technical phrases and military terminology. Abbreviations fall into various main categories and such classification helps with learning their appropriate pronunciation which is a key to smoothless oral communication in multinational environment.

Literature

AAP – 15 (2004): A collection of abbreviations and acronyms used in NATO documents and publications (English, French, German), <http://www.nato.int/docu/stanag/aap015.htm>
KÓSA, GERGELY & GYENGE, ZOLTÁN: METAR és TAF, www.ivao.aero/hu