

# Non-verbal Discourse of the Stripe in the Benin Army: Semiotic Aspects

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**Abstract** The military stripe reveals a non-verbal discourse, linked, on the one hand, to the fact that it carries an implicit message: rank, but on the other hand, because beyond this message, which is based on conventions, the stripe also carries different values that ultimately induce social logics. The present study, based on a survey conducted among soldiers of different ranks and different branches within the Benin Army, allows us to highlight the non-verbal discourse of the stripe. This discourse, hardly perceptible to the layman's eye, induces several representations including that of hierarchy, pay grade and a certain notion of class, even of family.

**Keywords:** linguistics, semiology, army, ranks, stripe

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Context

The study of signs within the Army, which is not very well developed in the humanities as compared to other works in the field of semiotics, must take into account various parameters: the usually "secret" status that the common man attributes to military deeds, the military/civilian divide that establishes the army almost as a "breed apart", [1] the double language of the stripe, which induces horizontal and vertical differentiations [2].

It is within this framework that we examine the non-verbal discourse of the stripe, from the point of view of the soldiers of the Beninese Army. The stripe is understood as the distinctive sign of rank in the army, the rank itself representing the degree of hierarchy. It is the level of responsibility, membership in the army and in the unit to which it belongs, the qualifications acquired and their level, and even the seniority, history and merits of the person who wears it, if we also think of decorations [3].

Ranks are symbolized by shoulder pads or scabbards on which officers, non-commissioned officers and enlisted soldiers wear their stripes. Each scabbard is made of a piece of cloth on which the insignia of the rank (the stripe or braid), and then the ideogram of the branch, is woven. The stripe is made of a specific number of chevrons (see example 1 in the appendix), bars (see example 2 in the appendix), or stars (see example 3 in the appendix) of specific colors.

### 1.2. Research Questions

Our questioning is twofold:

- What is the military service member's representation of his stripes?
- What social logics are developed by the non-verbal discourse of the stripe within the Army?

We adopt methods of discourse analysis with a strong linguistic and semiological coefficient, in line with the Barthesian approach to social communication [4], which prescribes an analysis of the meanings associated with the sign-image (connotation), and thus the enhancement of the second meaning of signs. We consider, as S. Moirand [5], that to properly analyze a discourse, one has:

*"to relate the distribution of marks to the outside of the discourse and to relate the linguistic functions to the representations and values of the discourse-producing communities."*

### 1.3. Set of Problems and Associated Scientific Issues

The ranks and their naming considered in this study are those currently in force in the Beninese Army (Law No. 2005-43 of 26 June 2006 on the General Status of Military Personnel in the Benin Armed Forces). On this basis, we asked military personnel about their perception of rank and their conception of the military hierarchy. Our work allows us to shed light on the representation that the military service member has of his stripe, the links to be established between the color of the stripe and the branch, the perception that he has of his superior and subordinates,

and the social logics developed by the non-verbal discourse of the stripe.

This set of problems of the double language of the stripe has already been tackled by André Thieblemont (1997) who carried out a study of the non-verbal signs of the French army, highlighting the vertical and horizontal logics that this system of signs induces. He infers that a certain political perspective is not absent from this double language of the stripe. He thus concludes by noting that there is no political discourse of the military that can be understood by obscuring the internal dynamics and social logics that underlie the double language of the stripe in the army. Jean Louis Trouillon (2006), in his book entitled *Introduction au langage des forces armées Anglophones* (Introduction to the Language of the English-speaking Armed Forces), reviewed the non-linguistic signs used by the military institution: uniform, design, color. According to him, these different insignia define rank. The interpretation of the sign is done without ambiguity by the members of the military institution, who hold the code, because the sign is unambiguous, that is to say, its interpretation is done without ambiguity by the person who has the code. On the other hand, for the one who does not hold the key, any attempt at interpretation remains a guessing game. He explained the abundance of signs and abbreviations in the army, by the fact that soldiers are people in a hurry. Even though this study concerns the English-speaking armed forces, it is a definite help in understanding more globally what can be called the military spirit.

Katia Sorin (2003) [6], as far as she is concerned, questioned the place of women soldiers in the French armed forces. After talking to women soldiers, she shows the difficulties of getting an assignment, the contradictions, and ambiguities of women soldiers, faced with the challenge of their integration into an essentially masculinized universe.

The merit of this sociological study is that it seeks to understand and interpret the reasons for women's assault on the army, the last bastion of strictly masculine work. This approach has allowed us to better understand the military institution, by apprehending the male-female relations that develop within. Finally, Marie-Anne Paveau (1996) carried out an ethnological and anthropological study of the French army and attempted to establish a group ethnolinguistic analysis. She considered that this army appears as a micro-society and elaborated a technical lexicon of the military and the identity of the soldier in her group; finally, she sketched out a dictionary of military slang. Paveau's work appears fundamental in the linguistic studies of the Armed Forces, in that it is widely cited in numerous later literatures. The ethnolinguistic approach adopted seems interesting to us in our attempt to understand the specific languages that develop in the micro-societies that armies represent. Paveau invented the notion of *militarity* (1997: 59), which she defines as "the set of markers (professional, legal, social, ideological, cultural, physical) attached to military status, which in our opinion make it as much a profession as a way of being". It has influenced many researchers such as Saber (2005-2006), who also speaks of *militarity*, but in the American army, as well as Trouillon (1998), who also

deals with *militarity* in the language of the (American and British) English-speaking forces.

The originality of our approach lies in the fact that it focuses specifically on the Armed Forces of Benin, an entity that has been the subject of very few scientific studies, and even less of linguistic studies. Our hypothesis is supported by the need to strive beyond words to understand the logics that derive from the stripe.

## 1.4. Scientific Objectives

### 1.4.1. General Objective

This work aims to understand the representations that donning the stripe induces for the soldiers of the army.

### 1.4.2. Specific Objectives

The specific objectives are:

OS 1: To make a descriptive inventory of the stripes in the Beninese Army.

OS2: To highlight the vertical and social differentiations induced by the stripe.

OS 3: To show the horizontal and cultural differentiations related to the stripe.

## 1.5. Hypotheses of the Study

### 1.5.1. Fundamental Hypothesis

The stripe conveys a non-verbal speech in the Beninese Army.

### 1.5.2. Secondary Assumptions

H1: It is possible to draw up an inventory of the stripes in the Beninese Army.

H2: The stripe induces vertical and social differentiations in the Beninese army.

H3: The stripe induces horizontal and cultural differentiations in the Beninese army.

## 1.6. Theoretical Framework

Researchers have used two distinct terms to refer to the same science. Thus, Charles Sanders Peirce [7] preference went to the term semiotics, while Ferdinand de Saussure [8] spoke of semiology. We have chosen to use the first term because "the terms semiotics and semiology are equivalent, although the term semiotics, imposed by the Anglo-Saxons, is constantly trending and replacing the term semiology (formerly the study of symptoms in medicine), which is ingrained in the French tradition" [9]. Given that our approach here is to understand the social logics within the Benin Armed Forces, we subscribed more to a semiotic approach, since the semiologist focuses on apprehension and the semiotician on understanding. So, in a way, the whole of semiotics lies in description, as long as we do not neglect the implications of such a position [10].

Our approach to this research work is inspired by Saussurian structuralism, which aim is to understand the code in force in any system based on the mechanisms and conventions that govern its use. Two semiotic currents claim this approach, namely the semiotics of signification and the semiotics of communication.

- The semiotics of meaning

For Metz [11], semiotics can be transversal (tales, myths, all written or oral narratives) or non-verbal (images of all kinds). This approach thus integrates the study of mass communication. Thus, from the end of the 1950s, Barthes began a critical analysis of the "language" of mass culture by considering the collective representations at work in social practices as signifying systems. In particular, he studied fashion as a system based on writings published in the press. In 1964, an important issue of the journal *Communications* contributed to the spread of interest in semiotic research. In addition, Barthes broadened the field of linguistics (historically limited to the sentence) to the study of the major types of textual production: discursive semiotics (which peculiarly deals with the study of discourse), and narrative semiotics, in particular. In the latter approach, semiotics appears as a science that aims to understand the way in which meaning is elaborated. This field of study concerns the totality of social productions (objects of consumption, fashions, rituals, etc.), particularly those conveyed by mass communication systems. In this perspective, the human being is considered in his social environment and not as a simple transmitter or receiver cut off from the world. All in all, Barthes, unlike Saussure, reaffirms the primacy of language and considers that semiology must be dependent on linguistics.

In order to relate this semiotics of the meaning to our subject, it would therefore aim to apprehend the way in which the meaning of stripes is elaborated. Obviously, in this sense, the set of stripes would be considered as a signifying system, the study of which would make it possible to apprehend its codes. Thus, this "semiotics of signification" goes far beyond another semiotic approach, represented by E. Buysens' [12] and L.-J. Prieto [13] work called "semiotics or semiology of communication".

- The semiotics of communication

These researchers (E. Buysens and L.-J. Prieto) limit their investigations to phenomena that fall within the scope of "communication", which they define as a voluntary process of transmitting information by means of an explicit system of conventions (i.e. a code), such as, for example, the highway code, the Morse code, the code of telephone numbers, the code of telegraphic signals, the sign code of topographic maps, etc. This second approach is more restrictive than the previous one because it is only interested in certain cultural facts. It focuses on the careful description of the code(s) underlying any mode of expression, with the language system serving as a model. It endeavors to distinguish signals into signs and symbols and to classify codes according to the articulations they present.

In this approach, the stripe system would be considered as a phenomenon pertaining to communication. As such, communication semiotics will focus on describing in detail the code underlying this system.

- Peirce's semiotic process

A sign, according to Peirce, can be simple or complex. Unlike Saussure, Peirce does not define the sign as the smallest significant unit at all. Anything, any phenomenon, however complex, can be considered a sign as soon as it enters a semiotic process. The semiotic process is a triadic

relationship between a sign or *representamen* (first), an object (second) and an interpretation (third).

Thus, the stripe will be considered here as the *representamen*, its object will be the rank it represents, and its interpreter will be the interpretation given to it. To revert to our example related to the brigadier general, the stripe badge of two golden stars will be the *representamen*, the object will be: brigadier general and the interpretation will be the meaning of this rank, that is to say a lowest-ranking general officer of Benin Armed Forces.

- The rhetoric of the image of Barthes

Barthes [14] proposes a two-movement analysis of the image:

- First, the description of the image as such, and therefore its denotation.

- Second, the analysis of the meanings associated with this first image sign, its connotation.

Thus, we no longer consider only the primary meaning of the signs, but also their secondary meaning. This means that linguistics does not greatly influence this science of signs, which seeks to differentiate between "primary meaning" and "induced meaning", which amounts to establishing a difference between the "signifier" and the "signified".

Of all the semiotics we have studied, Barthes's semiotics relating to clothing seems to be best adapted to the study of military stripes. Barthes distinguishes three different systems, depending on the substance involved in communication. These are: the written garment, the photographed garment and the worn (or real) garment. We find the classical distinction between language and speech.

Ultimately, this study is in line with Barthes' semiotic approach, which proposes an analysis of the denotation and connotation of the image.

## 1.7. Methodology

We have chosen the standard unit method [15] based on the fact that the different variables attached to an individual in the population we wish to study (the military) are not independent of each other, so that an individual who is in the population average for a certain number of important characteristics (branch, category) will also be little different from the population average for the other characteristics. We have therefore divided the population into thirteen subsets, representing the thirteen branches within the Army. And for each of these subsets, we administered a specific questionnaire for military personnel, another for non-commissioned officers, and a final one for officers.

Our corpus thus comprises 300 soldiers selected from the thirteen branches that make up the Benin Army: infantry, cavalry, artillery, logistics, quartermastery, signal, engineering, health services, finance administration, health administration, personnel management, emergency and firefighting services, and physical training, including 100 enlisted soldiers, 100 non-commissioned officers and 100 officers.

The information was collected by administering questionnaires in the various barracks through the Office of Intelligence and Civil-Military Actions office (*BRACM*)-which have been collected and processed, by

interviewing about ten officers at the armed forces' headquarters in Cotonou, and by consulting books and websites.

The field survey began in July 2018 and ended in August 2019.

## 2. Results and Discussion

Out of a total of 300 questionnaires administered, 298 were returned to us. We conducted a qualitative analysis of the results of this survey, highlighting the main features of convergence and divergence that emerge from the non-verbal language of the military stripe.

### 2.1. Enumeration of the Stripes

#### 2.1.1. Enlisted Soldiers Category

- Junior enlisted soldiers:
  - Private 2<sup>nd</sup> Class: the shoulder pad is empty
  - Private 1<sup>st</sup> Class: the shoulder pad features a stripe made of a single red chevron.
- Senior enlisted soldiers:
  - Corporal: the shoulder pad features a stripe with two red chevron stripes.
  - Lance-corporal: the shoulder pad features a three-chevron stripe, two red and one yellow.

#### 2.1.2. Non-Commissioned Officers Category

- Junior Non-Commissioned Officers:
  - Sergeant: the shoulder pad shows a stripe made of two golden chevrons.
  - Staff Sergeant: the shoulder pad features a stripe made of three golden chevrons.
- Senior Non-Commissioned Officers:
  - Warrant Officer: the shoulder pad features a stripe made of a white bar with a tiny red median split.
  - Chief Warrant Officer: the shoulder pad carries a stripe made of a golden bar with a tiny red median split.
  - Senior Warrant Officer: the shoulder pad features a stripe made of two tiny red and black lines on top of two golden bars.

#### 2.1.3. Officers Category

- Junior Officers:
  - Second Lieutenant: the shoulder pad features a stripe made of a single golden bar.
  - Lieutenant: the shoulder pad carries a stripe made of two golden bars.
  - Captain: the shoulder pad features a stripe made of three golden bars.
- Senior Officers
  - Major: the shoulder pad features a stripe made of four golden bars.
  - Lieutenant-colonel: the shoulder pad carries a stripe made of three golden bars interspersed with two silver sardines.
  - Colonel: the shoulder pad features a stripe made of five golden bars.
- General Officers
  - Brigadier General: the shoulder pad features a stripe with two golden stars.

- Major General: the shoulder pad carries a stripe with two golden stars.

- Lieutenant General: the shoulder pad features a stripe with four golden stars.

- General: the shoulder pad features a stripe with five golden stars.

We have just made a descriptive inventory of the stripe in the Beninese army: the secondary hypothesis 1 is verified.

### 2.2. Vertical and Social Differentiations

The stripe, symbol of rank within the army, induces vertical differentiations that create social strata, a kind of micro-societies within the great society that is the army. Thus, whether one is an enlisted soldier, a non-commissioned officer, or an officer, one does not project oneself in the same way.

#### 2.2.1. The stripe as a Symbol of Nobility among Officers

The position of officer is the highest in the army. To this level corresponds a certain prestige with which come increased responsibilities. Here the insignia of the stripe are golden, which confers a certain nobility on the officers. They consider non-commissioned officers and enlisted soldiers as subordinates, but above all as professional partners without whom the mission cannot succeed.

#### 2.2.2. The stripe as a Symbol of Exemplarity among Non-commissioned Officers

Non-Commissioned Officers are intermediaries between officers and enlisted men. They receive their orders from officers and then pass them on to the enlisted men under their command. They act as a kind of link between these two categories of soldiers. They owe respect to officers and expect respect from enlisted men. They believe that they should be an example for their subordinates, and they consider the (senior) officers *a contrario* as predecessors who must advise them.

#### 2.2.3. The Stripe as a Symbol of Filiation among Enlisted Soldiers

Enlisted members are doers. They receive orders from superiors and carry them out. They owe deference and respect to their superiors. More numerous, they constitute the base, the foundation of any army, as without them all command is futile. Beyond this strictly professional discourse, however, another, more social discourse develops: the enlisted soldier sees superiors as predecessors, not only in the profession of arms, but also in life itself. They therefore look to them for practical advice on how to avoid the pitfalls of life.

*"A superior is like an older brother, an older sister, or a father, and superiors deserve absolute respect, or they help us pass our professional exams and educate us in life."* (An enlisted man answering a question).

Corporals specifically consider themselves to be the "first cadres" of the army, the "watchdogs" of the service. Moreover, these vertical differentiations are accompanied by differences in salary (pay). However, the salaries received also depend on the positions held in the army.

We have just shown that there are vertical and social differentiations due to the wearing of stripes in the Beninese army: the secondary hypothesis 2 is verified.

## 2.3. Horizontal and Cultural Differentiations

### 2.3.1. Ranks and Colors

The shoulder pad bearing the stripe is usually green (for artillery, logistics, quarter mastery, signal, engineering, health services, finance administration, health administration, personnel management, and physical training). It can be green or blood-red for infantry, black for cavalry and flame-red for emergency and firefighting services.

Each rank is symbolized by a specific stripe worn on the shoulder pad with a specific number of chevrons, bars, stripes or stars of specific colors.

The service members, in general, do not know the meaning of the color worn, except for firefighters who associate the flame-red with fire and the airborne infantrymen who associate the blood-red to the ultimate sacrifice.

Therefore, wearing the same rank does not equate to having the same stripe. Here, the horizontal differentiation intervenes according to the branch to which the soldier belongs. It depends on the color of the branch but also on its ideogram, which appears on the stripe, except for the general officers' stripe that has a "combined arms" status (absence of ideogram on the stripe).

Military symbolism induces several social logics within the army. For example, it is worth identifying here, an *esprit de corps* that makes the soldier consider his fellow soldier as "a brother-in-arms" above all, before considering his rank. Thus, almost all the respondents feel that by being a soldier they belong to a large family. "The army is a big family. Living with brothers-in-arms for years is like living with brothers and sisters at home." (interviewed NCO). It should not be overlooked that military personnel, regardless of rank, live permanently in society. Moreover, there is a possibility of moving from a branch to another beyond the rank of the sergeant, which allows for flexibility and interactions between branches.

### 2.3.2. The Notion of Peer

The links between the military are consolidated at three essential levels:

- During basic (soldier, NCO, or officer) training, there is the notion of "peer" that emerges and includes all military members who belonged to the same class, regardless of their rank and branch.

- During the different professional development courses, cohabitation creates strong links.

- During missions outside the country, in the fields of operation, the military meet and fraternize.

We have thus just demonstrated that there are horizontal and cultural differentiations due to the wearing of stripes in the Beninese army: secondary hypothesis 3 is verified. All this allows us to note that the stripe does indeed convey non-verbal discourse in the Beninese army, which corroborates our fundamental hypothesis.

## 3. Conclusion

Our objective was to show the functional multiplicity of the non-verbal language of the stripe, as a sign within the Beninese army, and not as a simple badge of rank. We have come to realize that this sign induces a certain number of social logics, differentiations hardly perceptible to the civilian not introduced to military life. One can then deduce that the stripe not only determines the place assigned to a soldier within the army, but also induces a whole non-verbal discourse. Studying military stripe sheds light on the social functioning of the army, its stakes and the unspoken words associated with it.

## Acknowledgements

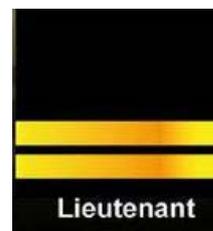
Captain Abdel-Aziz S. Ali Orou, Airborne Infantry Officer of the Benin Armed Forces

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## Annex



Example 1. Soldier 1st class stripe in a chevron (Source: Army)



Example 2. Lieutenant's stripe in two sardines (Source: Army)



Example 3. Three-star Major General's stripes (Source: Army)

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