Army tries new language

by Owen Clark

Maj. Lawrence Pizzi, chief of ACSO, says that bureaucratic language, or "greenspeak," isn't natural. "We acquire this greenspeak like a foreign language," Pizzi says. "We think of what we want to say in English and then we translate it into Army. The reader has to do the opposite. In this time of information explosion, we just don't have time to do that.

Military history is full of examples of the tragic consequences of poor writing. The charge of the Light Brigade and Custer's last stand are two of the best known instances. In each battle, orders were so poorly written that subordinates interpreted the commander's intent incorrectly. As a result of these blunders, soldiers died needlessly.

In 1985, the Department of the Army began a program to improve at all levels the ability to communicate the commander's intent. TRADOC received the responsibility for setting and enforcing standards for all Army writing. The Army Communicative Skills Office (ACSO) at TRADOC chartered communicative skills offices (CSOs) at its 16 service schools to conduct and monitor training in writing, and to help staff members comply with the new Army writing standards.

Two publications explain those standards. According to AR 600-70, "The Army Writing Program," effective writing is writing that can be understood in a single rapid reading and is generally free of errors in grammar, mechanics, and usage. DA Pam 600-67, "Effective Writing for Army Leaders," adds that good writing is clear, concise, organized, and to the point. Two badly needed changes in Army writing that the CSOs are concentrating on are improving organization (or "packaging"), and increasing the use of the active voice.

The new regulations and training materials advise writers to start with the information they would keep if they had to eliminate all the rest, in other words to "package" the main idea. Packaging includes four steps. The writer opens with a short, clear purpose sentence. The recommendation, conclusion, or most important information (the main point) comes next. The writer clearly separates each major section by using paragraphs, headings, or section titles, and white space. The writer uses a specific format if one is appropriate.

Consistent use of the active voice would be a major change. According to DA Pam 600-67, "Many Army writers overuse the passive voice and create sentences that are indirect and unfocused, and that slows communication." Passive writing often avoids giving or accepting responsibility. Something *is done*; no one (as far as the reader can tell) *does* anything. In some cases, this ducking of responsibility may be intentional—in which case the use of the passive voice is not a problem the CSO can solve. More often, however, those in the military beauracracy are so accustomed to reading passive, convoluted sentences that they simply assume, "This is how you write."

In contrast, the active voice is direct, natural, and forceful. It also shortens sentences by at least 20 percent. Active writing includes making verbs as strong as possible rather than burying them in nouns. For example, "decide" is stronger than "make a decision." Additionally, Army writers may now use personal pronouns such as "we" or "I" instead of such indirect terms as "this headquarters."

Improving Army writing is an immense task. According to TRADOC Pam 350-6, "Effective Staff Writing," "Old style Army writers take abstract words, use them in long and convoluted sentences, and create writing that wastes time, money, and hinders decision making."

Maj. Lawrence Pizzi, chief of ACSO, says that bureaucratic language, or "greenspeak," isn't natural. "We acquire this greenspeak like a foreign language," Pizzi says. "We think of

what we want to say in English and then we translate it into Army. The reader has to do the opposite. In this time of information explosion, we just don't have time to do that."

To help writers simplify and clarify their writing, TRADOC has developed two editing tools, the Quick-Screen Edit and the Clarity Index. To use the Quick-Screen Edit, an editor (or supervisor) highlights the "bottom line," the passive voice, long words and jargon, and obvious errors. Then someone revises the writing by moving the bottom line to the beginning, changing the other highlighted problems, and packaging the material. TRADOC's other editing tool, the Clarity Index, is almost identical to other measures of reading difficulty, such as Gunning's Fog Index and the Flesch-Kincaid Readability Index. In all three methods, the editor chooses a writing sample, adds the average sentence length to the percentage of long words, and then divides by .4. The result is the reading grade level of the material. Writers of student publications strive for an eighth-grade reading level.

The task of reeducating students, faculty, and staff in writing devolves on the 16 CSOs in the TRADOC schools. TRADOC carefully selected the initial 16 chiefs. Most of these lieutenant colonels and majors have backgrounds in English. Several have taught English at the United States Military Academy and other colleges.

At Fort Gordon, the CSO staff includes a lieutenant colonel as chief, a civilian educational specialist as deputy, and a secretary. An additional educational specialist slot remains to be filled. The local office began operation in September 1986.

The local CSO teaches a three-hour Army writing seminar at least once a month, using as texts TRADOC Pamphlets 350-5 and 350-6, "Effective Staff Writing." Demand for the seminar continues high even after several hundred people have received the training.

The CSO has also presented several Army writing seminars on request to local activities. The instructors tailor these seminars to the user's needs by analyzing samples of the activity's in-house writing and basing exercises on problems found in the writing. The office plans an executive writing seminar for division chiefs.

At Fort Gordon, the Signal Leadership Department (SLD) teaches the officer and NCO writing courses. The CSO monitors the 16-hour writing blocks in the Officer Basic and Officer Advanced Courses and the 30-hour remedial course taught by Dr. John Presley of Augusta College. Additionally, the CSO monitors the writing blocks in the Advanced Noncommissioned Officer Course (ANCOC) and will assist in adapting new materials from the Sergeants Major Academy for local use.

Similarly, the CSO is working with the Record Communications Department to develop a writing program for their basic NCO courses. The CSO will ensure that this program is compatible with the Sergeants Major Academy's revised writing program for NCOs.

The CSO is also concentrating on teaching writing to subject matter experts (SMEs). SMEs are selected to write Army publications because of their technical expertise; many, however, are deficient in writing skills. Because many of the SMEs are NCOs, the CSO again must coordinate its program with the Sergeants Major Academy's writing program for NCOs. Teaching writing to SMEs has many ramifications, and the CSO's involvement in it is still in the planning stage.

The CSO has also offered to teach writing seminars to USAR schools in the Southeast. The schools have indicated interest, and later the CSO will offer the seminars to other Reserve and National Guard units in the area.

The CSO is presently evaluating computer diagnostic software on writing with the aim of establishing a writing laboratory. Besides computers and editing devices, the lab will contain audio tapes, video tapes, programmed texts, books, and live instructors. It will contain materials to meet the needs of students and staff at all levels of proficiency in writing.

When he signed the foreword to DA Pam 600-67, Gen. John A. Wickham, Jr., added a handwritten note. "All of us, from chief on down, need to improve our skills." Certainly the problem is pervasive and difficult. Army writers, however, must comply with the program. As TRADOC Pam 350-5 says, "This new style and standard are not suggestions; they are the new Army way to write."

At a recent TRADOC conference, Gen. Carl E. Vuono challenged CSO personnel from the schools to work themselves out of a job. That challenge won't be easy to meet, but the CSO staffs intend to try. Too much is at stake for Army personnel to risk misunderstanding.

Mr. Clark is deputy of the Communicative Skills Office at Fort Gordon. In almost 20 years at Fort Gordon, he has held assignments at the Military Police School and at the Curricula Division and the Staff and Faculty Development Division of the Signal School. He holds a B.A. in English from the University of South Carolina and an M.A. in English from the University of Pennsylvania.