Losing People: A Linguistic Analysis of Minimization in First World War Soldiers' Accounts of Violence

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Abstract

This paper examines the First World War letters and diaries of Australian soldiers for insights into the relationship between language and violence, focusing on accounts of violent actions, and the injury and deaths these caused. Analysis from a corpus of writings from 22 soldiers demonstrates around two thirds of accounts utilize linguistic resources to minimize or downplay the realities of violence. Two main approaches are generally used: figurative language (euphemism and metaphor), and language that downplays human involvement (passive voice, simplified register, nominalization/light verb constructions and the use of inanimate nouns in place of people involved). Our exemplification and analysis of these strategies provides insight into both soldiers' experiences of violence and death and how they made sense of these experiences. The chapter thus adds to the understanding of First World War vernacular writing, contributes to existing scholarship by using a linguistic method of analysis, and more broadly considers the way violence is discussed.

The experience of First World War Australian soldiers assigned to frontline combat in the trenches inescapably involved confronting death and violence. Even if fortunate enough to avoid death or debilitating injuries, soldiers still frequently witnessed the suffering of others and were expected to inflict similar suffering onto those fighting on the other side of the front line. In trying to understand these experiences and soldiers' responses to the trauma of the endless violence around them, we are fortunate that many wrote about their experiences in diaries and in letters to friends and family and that, thanks to the efforts of family members and organizations like the Australian War Memorial, these materials have been preserved and made public. This chapter adds to existing literature on soldiers' experiences at war by examining the linguistic details of how accounts were written and exploring further the relationship between language and violence. The discussion is based on a close analysis of the language used to describe acts of violence in a corpus of First World War letters and diaries written by Australian soldiers.

Letter writing during the First World War proved to be a practice that soldiers took to with unpredicted enthusiasm.[1] Being able to communicate with friends and family was an important part of maintaining morale.[2] Despite extraordinary and harrowing experiences, in general these letters and diaries have been found to largely detail routine duties.[3] In the case of letters, this is understandable as potentially a reaction to censorship[4] but also reflects that correspondence served primarily to provide a connection to home and to reassure loved ones.[5] Given that Australians may have waited more than 50 days for post (compared to 3–6 days for European soldiers), information in letters was in fact often out-of-date by the time it was received,[6] thus underscoring that provision of information can only have been of secondary importance.

In considering the relationship between war and language, it is worthwhile contemplating the silence to which language stands in opposition. Given that the subject of the traumas of war often lies within the "socially constructed space" of silence,[7] where discussion of such topics is culturally repressed, the importance of what is not said or cannot be said should also be borne in mind. Particularly in the case of soldiers who fought at Gallipoli, Winter[8] illustrates the sheer magnitude of the silence around the psychological damage done. In considering what is 'unsaid' when violence is dicussed, Scarry argues that the main aim of war is inflicting injury but the injury is removed from official accounts.[9] She posits that this is achieved via strategies such as

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[1] Martyn Lyons, "French Soldiers and Their Correspondence: Towards a History of Writing Practices in the First World War," *French History* 17, no. 1 (2003).

[2] Alexander Watson, "Morale," in *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 191.

[3] Anne Powell, "Another Welcome Letter: Soldiers' Letters from the Great War," *Contemporary Review* 265, no. 1546 (1994); Marguerite Helmers, "Out of the Trenches: The Rhetoric of Letters from the Western Front," in *Languages and the First World War: Representation and Memory*, ed. Christophe Declercq and Julian Walker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 56; Lyons, "French Soldiers and Their Correspondence: Towards a History of Writing Practices in the First World War," 81–82.

[4] Soliders' correspondence was monitored, sometimes by their immediate officers, to ensure that sensitive military information was not shared and that they remained suitably committed to the war effort. Martha Hanna, "War Letters: Communication between Front and Home Front," in *1914–1918-Online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel, et al. (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2014).

[5] "A Republic of Letters: The Epistolary Transition in France During World War I," *American Historical Review of Communication* 108, no. 5 (2003): 1342; Lyons, "French Soldiers and Their Correspondence: Towards a History of Writing Practices in the First World War," 95; Alistair Thomson, "Anzac Stories: Using Personal Testimony in War History," *War & Society* 25, no. 2 (2013): 6.

[6] Hanna, "War Letters: Communication between Front and Home Front," 341; Kate Hunter, "More Than an Archive of War: Intimacy and Manliness in the Letters of a Great War Soldier to the Woman He Loved, 1915–1919," *Gender and History* 25, no. 2 (2013).

[7] Jay Winter, "Thinking About Silence," in *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Efrat Ben-Ze'ev, Ruth Ginio, and Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 4.

[8] "Shell Shock, Gallipoli and the Generation of Silence," in *Beyond Memory: Silence and the Aesthetics of Remembrance*, ed. Alexandre Dessingué and Jay Winter (New York; London: Routledge, 2015).

[9] Elaine Scarry, "Injury and the Structure of War," *Representations* 10 (1985).

omission and redescription. Redescription includes the use of figurative language, which often replaces the individual experience with an understanding of the larger 'body' of a military, that is, as part of a whole, sometimes conceptualized as one man. Her analysis relies on the formal writings of politicians and military strategists but she suggests that this may also be indicative of everyday talk about the same topics. Fussell, whose work remains key in understanding the language used (or not used) to describe war,[10] specifically considers writing about the First World War.[11] Moreover, his discussion is particulary relevant as it draws on (British) soliders' letters in addition to memoirs and literary works. He discusses the unwillingness, difficulty and perhaps futility of describing the experiences of war and specifically comments on the use of literary devices such as metaphor, euphemism, and the passive voice in place of more 'factual testimony'.[12] He suggests that First World War letter writing developed its own rhetoric that engaged with literary traditions of the time. More recent discussions have continued to engage with the notion of the experiences of the First World War as in some ways unable to be captured, despite the vast literature they generated.[13] Others have considered how the First World War is still remembered and represented in language close to 100 years later.[14]

In writing their letters, soliders had to deal with the potentially conflicting desires of wanting to reassure family, friends, and other readers that all was well, and wanting to express something of the realities of the difficult conditions and ever present violence that they were enduring. Writers could just omit accounts which might concern those they were writing to, but they could also frankly describe their experiences at the risk of distressing readers. Our transcription and reading of a selection of letters and diaries suggests that at times soldiers did both. Previous analysis of letters has emphasised themes other than the war, such as White's exploration of the soldier as tourist describing their travels,[15] or Ziino's emphasis on the theme of home.[16] We argue that a significant feature of these letters is that writers sought to balance the competing demands of recounting their difficult experiences while trying not to alarm audiences through the ways they composed their diary entries and letters. The minimization we

[10] Santanu Das and Kate McLoughlin, "Introduction," in *The First World War: Literature, Culture, Modernity*, ed. Santanu Das and Kate McLoughlin (Oxford: British Academy, 2018).

[11] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

[12] Ibid., 169.

[13] See Das and McLoughlin, "Introduction." and also contributions to the volume, particularly in the 'Unfothomable' section; Also Joanna Bourke, "War and Violence," *Thesis Eleven* 86, no. 1 (2016)., whose discussion inlcudes consideration of experiences that were difficult to share with civilians, such as enjoyment in killing.

[14] Ross J. Wilson, "Still Fighting in the Trenches: 'War Discourse' and the Memory of the First World War in Britain," *Memory Studies* 8, no. 4 (2015).

[15] Richard White, "The Soldier as Tourist: The Australian Experience of the Great War," *War & Society* 5, no. 1 (1987).

[16] Bart Ziino, "A Kind of Round Trip: Australian Soldiers and the Tourist Analogy, 1914–1918," ibid.25, no. 2 (2006).

can observe in accounts of violence might have been a strategy not just to protect readers but also the writers themselves.[17]

A range of linguistic choices are employed in the letters under analysis that have the effect of making accounts of violence less confronting. Two regular approaches (conscious or not) we have identified are the use of figurative language such as euphemism, and the removal of human subjects from depictions of violence. Thus, in the title of this paper, *losing people* refers to the avoidance of direct reference to *dying* or *killing* (cf. *losing*), but also refers to how human agents and patients, the doers or experiencers of violent actions, are left out of the accounts. Violence is depicted as happening but the role of writers and their friends in inflicting it is frequently elided along with the resulting human costs. While use of the passive voice has been particularly criticized for its potential to hide agency[18] (and, indeed, much of the criticism betrays a misunderstanding of what the passive is[19]), our analysis shows that the passive is just one of a number of means these writers have at their disposal that can be used to remove human agents from the picture.

Methodology*: Corpus and Analysis*

The corpus used here consists of approximately 110,000 words of letters, postcards, and diaries from 22 Australian soldiers, donated to the Australian War Memorial. Originally, materials from twelve soldiers with Irish heritage were transcribed and collated to provide a corpus of informal historical Australian English and to explore the influence of Irish English on this variety,[20] but a further ten authors from English backgrounds were added later for comparative purposes.[21] Historical sociolinguistic researchers value unedited and non-literary texts for their approximation of spoken language.[22] The writers of these letters and diaries are unlikely to have spent much time composing the text given limitations on soldiers' time and resources.

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[17] See Joanna Bourke, "The Emotions in War: Fear and the British and American Military, 1914–45," *Historical Research* 74, no. 185 (2001). Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009). for discussion of related issues beyond the scope of this current analysis.

[18] broadly and in the context of the First World War e.g. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 177–78.

[19] Geoffrey K. Pullum, "The Land of the Free and the Elements of Style," *English Today* 26, no. 2 (2010).

[20] see John Rice-Whetton, "Lucky Enough to Get the Embrace: Do Passive Constructions with *Get* Represent Irish Influence on Australian English?" (Honours thesis, University of Melbourne, 2015).

[21] Jean Mulder, John Rice-Whetton, and Cara Penry Williams, ""Lucky Enough to Get the Embrace": 'Get'-Constructions as an Irish Inheritance in Australian English," in *the Australian Linguistic Society Conference* (Melbourne 2016).

[22] Stefan Dollinger, "Written Sources for Canadian English: Phonetic Reconstruction and the Low-Back Vowel Merger " in *Varieties of English in Writing: The Written Word as Linguistic Evidence*, ed. Raymond Hickey (Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2010), 198.

Heavy editing or rewriting was not practical due to the scarcity of writing materials. For instance, we find close to no wasted space on any piece of paper. There is evidence of words being added or replaced on occasion but little more than this. The relatively unedited, informal nature of these texts was clear to the soldiers themselves, as illustrated in the following passage, in which Trooper Oliver Clarke expresses shock that someone intended to publish a passage from a previous letter he had written, being embarrassed by what he saw as "poor composition":

I've never yet recovered from the shock I got when hearing that Eva O'S intends publishing that bit about the Turk. I'd be ashamed of my life if she does. Why the composition of the thing, and everything else about it, is simply atrocious. She wouldn't mention any names, would she? Anyone who knows me will think that I'm an infernal idiot. (O. Clarke 29/11/1916)

For the purposes of the earlier research, we sought to collect writings from soldiers of similar demographic profile, using the information which accompanied materials and further research to select younger males of lower military ranks, in the Australian Imperial Force, with Irish or English heritage. There was further pre-selection which influences discussion here in that, where there was more material available for a soldier than we could include, we capped their contribution at 5,000 words, selecting those writings judged more likely to contain descriptions of violent actions. Table 2.1 provides a full list of the authors included and some basic information about them and their texts, with more details on each of their lives and military service available through the Australian War Memorial's website.[23,24]

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[23]At the time we transcribed these materials, the function that allows transcription on the website itself was not available.

[24] The two *Clarke*s and the two *Allen*s were pairs of brothers.

Table 2. 1 – Soliders and their contributions to overall corpus

Name	Year of birth	Final rank	Material available	No. of words included
Ernest Allen	1893	Private	38pp of personal letters	5,000
James Edward Allen	1886	Private	31pp of personal letters	4,500
John Joseph Bourke	1892	Lieutenant	16pp of negative Photostat copies of letters	2,750
James Vincent Clarke	1893	Gunner	17pp of typewritten copies of personal letters	8,050
Oliver Joseph Bourke Clarke	1892	Trooper	21pp of typewritten copies of personal letters	12,100
Errol Cappie Nepean Devlin	1891	Private	34pp of personal letters and postcards	4,650
Keith Shadford Sheen Dowling	1889	Gunner	9pp of personal letters	1,700
Alfred Bailey Eades	1895	Lieutenant	21pp of personal letters	3,550
Alfred Ernest Forbes	1896	Signaller	97pp of diary	5,000
Wilfred Denver Gallwey	1898	Corporal	c. 1900pp of personal letters	5,000
John Kingsley Gammage	1887	Private	66pp of diary	7,450
Samuel Hedley Hemming Hawkins	1897	Private	230pp of diary	5,000
James Hodgen	1897	Private	5pp of one letter	1,450
Albert William Keown	1891	Private	29pp of one letter	5,400
James Charles Martin	1901	Private	4pp of personal letters	600
Edward Michael McNamee	1888	Private	202pp of diary	13,000
Theodore Milton Pflaum	1895	Second Lieutenant	76pp of diary	5,050
Herbert Vincent Reynolds	1896	Private	344pp of diary	5,000
Edgar Roy Stanford	1893	Trooper	35pp of diary and postcards	5,000
James Joseph Augustus Sweeney	1899	Trooper	25pp of personal letters	2,850
Lindsay Robert Turner	1887	Lieutenant	c.350pp of diary	5,000
Henry George Whiting	1889	Private	20pp of diary	2,500

While the focus in selecting texts for the corpus originally related to studying Australian English, it was soon clear that this corpus provided a rich resource for understanding the personal experiences of Australian soldiers in the First World War. Furthermore, we recognized the potential for linguistics to shed fresh light on this understanding.

For the purposes of this analysis, all accounts of death and violence were manually isolated from the corpus. Each was then coded for presence of minimization of violence or if it was plainly described. If there was minimization, this was then coded for the linguistic strategies which achieved this. Some categories were pre-determined based on observations from reading

the materials and others were added during analysis, ensuring that analysis was responsive to the data. The coding was shared by the authors and then reviewed for consistency. This process was completed at the sentence-level or more narrowly when more than one strategy was found within a sentence. It should be noted, that the accounts that do not employ minimization read as dramatic or very violent, due to the commonness of the processes which avoid this. This highlights the difficulty of any suggestion that a 'neutral' way to describe violent events exists.

Results and Discussion

The corpus yielded 1,184 references to death and violence. Around one third of these were frank or dramatic accounts. In the other two thirds, strategies of linguistic minimization were evident. The writers downplay or obscure the involvement of human subjects, both in relation to inflicting and suffering violence. This primarily manifests in one of two ways. Firstly, when human subjects are directly referred to, the violence itself may be downplayed through euphemism or metaphor. Alternatively, when violence is more directly referred to, humans are distanced from the action or even omitted entirely. This is achieved through techniques such as the passive voice, simplified register, nominalization/light verb constructions, and use of inanimate nouns in place of human referents.

        Some forms of minimization are difficult to describe in linguistic terms without an analysis that moves beyond an examination of the presence of particular linguistic devices or structures. For example, rhetorical strategies beyond the scope of our analysis include the use of humour and placement within the text. In the latter case, death is sometimes mentioned briefly amongst mundane events, for example, between a description of the weather and an account of daily duties. This could be understood as 'burying' distressing news (thinking of the audience in writing) or might represent the reality of the mindset and experience of the author (what we may think of as dramatic news was a mundane event, properly discussed alongside other routine experiences). In this way, such language use could be understood as minimization or as acceptance, with this ambiguity likely unresolvable.

        Before discussing minimization in the corpus, the focus of our analysis, it is instructive to consider some examples that did not employ these strategies, as a point of comparison. The first excerpt exemplifies how confronting unmitigated descriptions of violent events encountered in war can be:

    One chap was brot in with his brains shot out but still lingering on: I sat & watched him die
    with absolutely no other feeling than that of indifference at the time: your brain gets
    numbed with the sight of pain & suffering I expect. (Keown 26/5/1916)

In the above account which comes from a diary, the author acknowledges the ordinariness of watching others in pain and dying. The use of *gets numbed*, indicating a change of state, implies that this is a response that has built up over time. He notes that his acceptance might have developed because of the repeated experience of violence. Such a lack of reaction may have been necessary to endure such experiences.

Similarly, writers are not endlessly stoic and at times they discuss the stress and horror of their experiences. For example, in a letter to his mother, Errol Devlin speaks plainly about the effects on mental health for himself and those around him of watching half of their battalion die in the course of one day.

> Two of our officers went dotty on our fatal Sunday + small wonder too. It is quite common for men to go mad here. The strain on the nerves is so severe a lot of the chaps have gone away broken down mentally and physically. I have stood the strain so far but I think a shell would do me no harm. (Devlin 2/9/1915)[25]

Finally, to illustrate that soldiers on occasion were responsive to the pressures around omission and minimizing, and the importance of mail, there are few passages that explicitly support the understanding of the role of letters discussed in the introduction. For instance, the following excerpt outlines the desire to keep certain details from family members to protect them:

> *I was taken in to hospital on the ship and after a weeks treatment came out none the worse.*
> *well except my ears which gave me some trouble for a fair time afterwards. I often wonder whether Mother found out about this.*
> *I wrote to Nell and told her but kept it from home incase it would cause anxiety to them, not for one moment did I think that Nell would not worry, at the same time those kind of things are best kept away from home while so far away from them.* (Forbes 1916)

This final excerpt references the role of mail and the link to home in this:

> *Got the mail just as we were going into the trenches (from Father Keith Ed S & KB) the firing lines seemed much closer to home while reading the mail.* (Stanford 23/5/1915).[26]

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[25] This refers to the experiences of the 18th Battalion on 22/08/1915 at Hill 60. Devlin reports 600 men dying in a few hours, including all of his "mates".

[26] The cataloguing of letters received seen here is common in the corpus. In fact, a lot of letters spend considerable time discussing letters sent and received, highlighting again their importance to soldiers.

Downplaying Violence and Death via Figurative Language

Figurative uses of language allow authors to indirectly refer to taboo topics. In the corpus, we found frequent uses of both euphemism and metaphor to avoid directly referring to violence and its effects.

     Euphemism:

The taboo around death in many cultures arises from fear, and killing people is generally regarded as taboo outside of war.[27] Yet, even when harming others is sanctioned, as it is to shoot 'the enemy', there is an awareness of the usual taboo and this is shown in the use of figurative or vague language.[28] Euphemism, as a device to make the unpleasant more pleasing, is often used to replace words that relate to taboo topics with others less likely to trigger a visceral response. In addition to being associated with taboo, euphemism is also linked to repression.[29]

     We found euphemism used extensively in the corpus: we identified and analysed 241 instances. In this section, we explore its effects and describe some of the reoccurring forms or themes. Considering effects, in both (1) and (2) the writer refers to the death of soldiers indirectly by mentioning something that is not death but implies it.

> 1. *I would not care a rap if 75 per cent of our officers **had a wooden cross over his head*** (Gammage 25/7/1915)
> 2. *I have seen many of our brave lads **strewn about the ground*** (E. Allen 23/4/1916)

In (1), people's deaths are referred to quite indirectly through a description of a feature of a grave. The second example is of a type more common in the accounts: information is omitted and vaguely referred to and the reality can only be inferred. Note that here *dead* could be added to the end of the sentence so it almost reads as ellipsis, yet the phrasing is not definite about the *lads* being dead as opposed to injured; this lack of specificity is common. Similarly, we discuss below that to *get in the way of a bullet* is a way of avoiding mentioning someone being shot by someone and also omits whether the result was minor injury, major injury or death.

     Although there was great variety in euphemisms used, there were reoccurring themes or types of usage. One was minimizing the amount of danger faced by soldiers as shown in (3).

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[27] Keith Allan and Kate Burridge, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 2006), 229.

[28] Ibid., 230–31.

[29] Paul Chilton, "Metaphor, Euphemism and the Militarization of Language," *Current Research on Peace and Violence* 10, no. 1 (1987): 12.

3. *Fritz had a great chance and would have done a lot **more damage** if we had'nt kept him so **busy*** (V. Clarke 6/5/1917)

Here both 'doing damage' and 'keeping him busy' can be understood as euphemistic references to artillery, gunfire, and fighting. This example also illustrates how vagueness helps to obscure human targets. Uses of *Fritz* and other nicknames also make the German army sound as though it consists of just one man.[30] Laugesen notes these types of nicknames 'can help to dehumanise the enemy, thus making killing easier'[31] (see also *the hun* (German soldiers/German people/the German army) and *Jacko, Abduls* (Turkish soldiers/the Turkish army) in examples below).

As mentioned above, it was common to avoid making clear if individuals were injured or killed, leaving statements open to interpretation. For instance, in (4) *don't last very long* is not specific about the reason why; readers are left to draw their own conclusions.

4. *men dont last very long in the Machine Gun Coy as a rule* (Bourke 23/2/1917)

We further see the removal of direct reference to people in accounts of injury or death achieved through specific terminology such as *case* in (5). Often in such examples, it can read as more of a military understanding of the situation than a personal one, which was a strategy used to maintain morale, with the 'big picture' kept in mind for individual soldiers.[32]

5. ***walking cases** had to lie out in the open as the wards were full. **694 cases** having come in this night alone* (Keown 26/5/1916)

One final reoccurring use across authors was *get/got* to mean to injure, shoot or kill, or refer to a bullet; in fact, this was the most frequent euphemism, with examples (6)–(9) showing some of the variation.

6. *Bombs **get** a few at night* (Gammage 28/11/1915)
7. *and tell the latter gentleman that I'm going to **get** half a dozen "Abduls" for him alone, if I have'nt already done so* (O. Clarke 9/8/1916)
8. *Dropped my bundle I dont care if I **get** one or not just as well die of bullets as starvation & thirst* (Gammage 21/7/1915)

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[30] see Scarry, "Injury and the Structure of War," 8.

[31] Amanda Laugesen, *Diggerspeak: The Language of Australians at War* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2005), 90.

[32] Watson, "Morale," 190.

9. *company was lucky enough to have most of these bursting behind them as they advanced but some of the poor beggars must have **got** them* (Keown 26/5/1916)

The verb *get* functions in these and further examples as a generalized verb of violence. It supports inexplicitness through its flexibility, allowing subject and object to be swapped and the grammatical instrument to be highlighted (e.g. ***A bullet** got me in my shoulder* rather than *I got a bullet in my shoulder*). The use of non-specific references often follow the verb *get,* for example *get one* or *get a few*.

In summary, the variety of euphemisms used by soldier-writers all minimize violence in these accounts. They allow only oblique reference to taboo actions and death, and have the effect of making the details of what actually occurred less clear. This lack of direct reference to injury, death, and the actions that cause them arguably protects the reader from the shockingness of forbidden topics, and as Fussell suggests, events that no one wanted to know about.[33] It potentially also protected the writers themselves, allowing them to not be on record regarding their actions or what they had witnessed, keeping these matters 'below the surface' of silence.[34]

Metaphor:

Metaphor involves referring to something indirectly through use of another term, invoking their shared qualities. In their classic book, Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphor is a system of understanding the world, not just discussing it.[35] For example, the conceptual metaphor in English that 'argument is war' relates not just to the words used discussing arguments but more fundamentally how speakers understand arguing.[36] Thus the metaphorical discourse of 'fear in war as disease', led to understandings of it as contagious.[37] The idea that metaphor can shape the way people think therefore links it to discussions of propaganda and coercion.[38]

Our analysis found 238 instances of metaphorical reference and, as with euphemism, there was considerable variety. In many ways, the use of metaphor functioned similarly to euphemism in soldiers' writings. Metaphors might be considered as part of rhetorical style or used for stylistic effect but, in these accounts, they occur often in minimizing and avoiding contexts. Some of the examples employ metaphors common in English.

The verb *lose* as in *we lost 6 more men*, allows metaphorical reference to soldiers being killed or injured by referring to a different kind of event. This is an example of a metaphor so

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[33] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*.

[34] Winter, "Thinking About Silence."

[35] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[36] See also Scarry, "Injury and the Structure of War." on understandings of war

[37] Bourke, "The Emotions in War: Fear and the British and American Military, 1914–45," 315.

[38] Chilton, "Metaphor, Euphemism and the Militarization of Language," 15.

commonly used in contemporary English (e.g. *losing a life* or *we lost Ruth this year*) that its figurativeness is often forgotten. In this corpus, the 'loss' is on a larger scale but works similarly to avoid mentioning of death or the events that lead to it.

10. *It was here we **lost** nearly all the men **lost** in the fight* (Stanford 19/5/1915)
11. *We **lost** a good number of Officers in the great attack on Poziéres* (McNamee 7/7/1916)

We argue that this minimizes accounts of death, as *lost* sounds less 'final' and more 'peaceful' than direct references to dying or killing (compare *all the men killed in the fight*).

Various metaphors are used in the recounting of incidents of people being shot or injured; an example using *blown away* is shown in (12).

12. *Major Scott from Wangaratta was **blown right away** with a "Jack Johnstone"[39] last week, it never left a trace of him* (Bourke 8/12/1915)

The later information in (12) makes clear that this refers to a death and suggests some descriptiveness in the choice of words, but it still reads as less devastating than possible non-metaphorical alternatives.

There are a series of different metaphors used to describe the fighting and conflict in which it was depicted as 'fun', 'exciting', or 'lively' as in example (13) or as the opposite, routinized as just work or a job, exemplified in (14).

13. *It is very quiet where we are so we are not seeing much of **the fun*** (Martin 4/10/1915)
14. *Night will see us in France + seven days there training + then **to business*** (E. Allen 1/2/1916)

Descriptions of shellfire compare it variously to medicine, weather/rain, a conversation and even a social interaction, as shown in (15).

15. *things were very quite here except for a few 'Mortars'. which **paid a visit every now and again*** (Hodgen 30/6/1918)

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[39] *Jack Johnstone*, or more usually *Johnson*, refers to a particular type of German shell that produced thick black smoke, with the reference to the contemporaneous African American heavyweight champion boxer nicknamed the *big smoke* Laugesen, *Diggerspeak: The Language of Australians at War*.

While metaphors are common in speech and writing, even in informal styles, it is clear in this corpus that they assist writers in maintaining a balance between reporting their experiences and not detailing them explicitly. While, as some examples above show, traumatic events are still being described, metaphor allows a downplaying of the violence surrounding them.

Both euphemism and metaphor, as exemplified here, minimize the experiences of violence and often make literal understandings ambiguous regarding death and violence. Through their indirectness, they also minimize and even 'belittle' violent events.

Downplaying the Involvement of Humans

In addition to the kind of figurative language discussed above, we found one other general strategy that letter and diary writers employed to avoid discussing the violent reality of war in direct terms. This was to use a range of linguistic devices that either place a degree of separation between the people involved and the violence, or allow for the people involved not to be mentioned at all. Specifically, the particular linguistic devices that are present in the soldiers' writings that we discuss are: the passive voice, simplified register, nominalization/light verb constructions, and the use of inanimate nouns in place of those with human reference.

Passive Voice:
As described by Huddleston and Pullum, the passive is a grammatical construction whereby a noun phrase that would normally appear as an object of the verb in an active sentence, instead appears as the subject of the verb.[40] So, for example, *the letter*, which is the direct object of the active sentence (*Errol gave the letter to Vincent*), can also appear as the subject of the passive sentence (*The letter was given to Vincent (by Errol)*). Thus, when using the passive, what would usually be the subject of the verb, here *Errol*, is relegated to an optional prepositional phrase with *by*.

As shown in the latter example, in form, a passive sentence is typically made up of the following: the subject (in this case, *the letter*) a form of *be* (*was*), the main verb in its past participle form (*given*), any other complements or adjuncts (*to Vincent)*, and finally, as just

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[40] Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1427–47.

mentioned, the performer of the action of the verb can optionally appear in a prepositional phrase (*by Errol*). Less commonly, passives can be formed with the verb *get* instead of *be,* giving *I got paid* in place of *I was paid*.

In the corpus, we found 132 instances of the passive voice being used in descriptions of violence, such as in examples (16) and (17).

> 16. *we **were attacked** during the morning & lost many men* (Gammage 8/8/1915)
> 17. *Charlie Hayden **was killed** outright* (Devlin 2/9/1915)

Of these instances, 120 (91.7%) occurred without a *by*-phrase, meaning that there was no indication of who or what was performing the action referred to by the verb. For example, in (16) there is no mention of who the attacker is, and in (17) there is no mention of who the killer is. Furthermore, of the twelve cases where there is a *by*-phrase present, there are only three examples like (18) which construe people as responsible, the other nine being examples such as (19), where it is shells or something else inanimate that are seen as responsible for potentially blowing them to bits.

> 18. *the drunken cad who sent many good men to their death **was shot** by our own men* (Gammage 6/8/1915)
> 19. *A slight mistake & we would have **been blown** to bits by our own shells* (Keown 26/5/1916)

While there are some examples of the type that Fussell discusses,[41] in which the use of passives seems to deliberately obscure the agent(s) responsible for an event, in most cases, the omission of an agent can just be explained by the fact that it is obvious who is broadly responsible. In (16) it is obvious that it is 'the enemy' who has attacked. At the same time, to look at an example like (17), while one can blame 'the enemy', it is not especially relevant but also difficult to know which particular soldier on the other side of the trenches may have fired the bullet that killed Charlie Hayden. Furthermore, understandings from a military perspective, common in these writings and used as a way for soldiers to cope, showed little interest in this sort of individual responsibility.[42] While the passive voice can be used to obscure responsibility, in this corpus it primarily seems to be used just to avoid mentioning an agent that is either obvious, irrelevant, or unknown. It should not be downplayed, however, that it simultaneously has the effect of

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[41] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 177–78.
[42] Scarry, "Injury and the Structure of War."; Watson, "Morale."

removing humans from the picture in the way that events of violence are described and conceived of.

Simplified Register:

Another very common feature in these writings is the use of a simplified register involving the frequent omission of functional elements. This kind of writing has been referred to as *telegraphic/telegrammatic style*,[43] or *telegraphese* (or *block language*[44]), so named because it resembles the hyper-reduced style found in telegrams. This type of writing is present in a range of contexts, including sports commentary,[45] newspaper headlines,[46] and student note-taking.[47] What these scenarios have in common is the strong pressure for conciseness due to limitations of time or space. Overall, Ferguson finds it useful to talk of 'simplified registers of the economy type' (in contrast to other simplified registers like baby-talk or foreigner-talk).[48]

It is clear that soldiers writing from the front were subject to such pressures. Writing materials such as paper could be hard to come by, and additionally, the amount of time available to spend on writing may have been limited. However, by no means is this style unique to war-time diary writers; Haegeman has done a significant amount of work on this type of grammatical reduction in diaries in general, particularly looking at the omission of subjects.[49] The fact that we also find occasional similar use of this simplified register in the letters is suggestive that these soldiers were especially under such pressures to use this succinct form of writing.

In particular, the types of simplification found in these writings are the following (each exemplified only once due to our own space limitations):

The omission of the copula: In (20), where one would normally expect *were* to form the passive, here there is nothing intervening between the subject *Craig & Evan & tom* and the past participle *wounded*.

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[43] e.g. David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 341.

[44] Heinrich Straumann, *Newspaper Headings: A Study in Linguistic Method* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1935).

[45] Charles A Ferguson, "Sports Announcer Talk: Syntactic Aspects of Register Variation," *Language in Society* 12, no. 2 (1983).

[46] Ingrid Mårdh, *Headlinese: On the Grammar of English Front Page Headlines* (Malmö: CWK Gleerup, 1980).

[47] Richard D. Janda, "Note-Taking English as a Simplified Register," *Discourse Processes* 8, no. 4 (1985).

[48] Ferguson, "Sports Announcer Talk: Syntactic Aspects of Register Variation," 168.

[49] Liliane Haegeman, "Register Variation, Truncation, and Subject Omission in English and in French," *English Language and Linguistics* 1, no. 2 (1997); "Subject Omission in Present-Day Written English," *Rivista di Grammatica Generativa* 32, no. 2007 (2007); "The Syntax of Registers: Diary Subject Omission and the Privilege of the Root," *Lingua* 130 (2013). inter alia.

> 20. *Craig & Evan & tom wounded* (Stanford 14/5/1915)

The omission of the subject: In (21), the understood subject, *I*, does not appear; the clause just begins with the verb *was*.

> 21. *Was in the front line last night. And the sight was awe inspiring* (J.E. Allen 4/6/1917)

The omission of subject and copula: In (22), while the full form of the sentence would be *we were shelled…* in this case, both *we* and *were* are omitted so that the sentence begins with the passive participle *shelled*.

> 22. *Shelled all day attacked at night* (Gammage 26/11/1915)

The omission of existential *there is/are*: In (23), we find noun phrases being used in isolation, and not apparently being embedded in any sentential structure. The meaning seems to be existential, saying that 'there was a heavy rally; there were bombs galore'. As such, it seems to make sense to understand such examples as being equivalent to structures with *there is/are*, just with the expletive subject and verb omitted.

> 23. *Heavy rally Bombs in Galore* (Gammage 12/7/1915)

Verbless clauses: In (24), we find a clause which just consists of a subject, *one slug of schrapnell,* and a prepositional phrase *through my blanket* which describes that path that the subject travels along. A full sentence would require a verb like *went* or *passed*, but that is not present here.

> 24. **one slug of schrapnell through my blanket**. *but I was not lying down thank god* (Gammage 29/5/1915)

Numbers used in isolation: Finally, in (25), we find that the numeral *14* by itself is being used to refer to 14 people. While not unusual in the contexts where there is a clear antecedent (e.g. *of the 20 people there, I knew 10*), in these writings it tends to be used without such an antecedent, where what the number is referring to needs to be inferred from the broader context.

> 25. *I think we buried 14 on the voyage of two & a half days to Alexandria* (Keown 26/5/1916)

Overall, the omissions that occur can only be made because what is meant is clear enough from the context for the omitted elements to be recovered. However, this does not mean that there is not an effect of leaving these elements out. Writing *shelled at night* instead of *we were shelled at night*, or *we buried 14* instead of *we buried 14 men*, leaving out explicit reference to the humans involved, has the result of downplaying the human cost of the violence that occurred. Even just writing *Craig & Evan & tom wounded* rather than *Craig & Evan & tom were wounded*, and thus not making a direct grammatical link between the subject and the action has the effect of minimizing the violence by not making explicit the connection between the subject and the action.

Nominalization/Light Verb Constructions:
Another recurring feature of these letters and diaries is reference to violent events using nominal structures (noun phrases). This tends to take either one of two forms: either the nominal that carries the semantics of a verbal event occurs independently, or it occurs as part of a light verb construction. The latter is a structure which refers to an event using two parts: a nominal which describes the kind of event, and a 'light verb' which carries the tense and aspect of the clause, but contributes little to the semantics (hence its 'light' status). For example, in *I had a rest*, *a rest* describes the kind of event, but *had* is the finite verb in the sentence.[50]

As an example, *bombard* is most basically a verb meaning 'to attack with bombs', but in many cases in the corpus, events of bombarding are referred to with the nominalized form *bombardment*, derived by adding the suffix *-ment,* a process discussed by Huddleston and Pullum.[51] In examples like (26), it refers to an instance of bombarding separately from any finite verb, while in an example like (27) it combines with the verb *give* to make a light verb construction, giving an overall verbal meaning of 'we bombard heavily (and are bombarded heavily back)'.

> 26. *After an hour's bombardment we are to move forward and renew the barrage*
>   (Turner 1918–19)
> 27. *We give big Bombardment & get plenty back* (Gammage 23/11/1915)

The effect of using these structures is slightly different in each of the two cases, but the overall result is similar. If *bombard* were the verb, it would normally require both a subject and an object. For example, *we bombarded them* involves both a subject responsible for the bombarding, and an object that undergoes the bombarding. By contrast, the noun *bombardment*

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[50] Huddleston and Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, 290–96.
[51] Ibid., 1700–706.

in *after an hour's bombardment,* does not need to make reference to either the 'bombarder' or the 'bombardee'. As a result, it has the effect of removing the humans involved from the overall construal of the event. If the humans that are involved are in fact referred to, they tend to be relegated to a prepositional phrase, and as such are linguistically separated from the violence. As an example, in (28), those firing appear as the object of *from*.

28. *up to the present we had very little fire from the hun* (Hodgen 30/6/1918)

The effect is similar when a light verb construction is used as in (27), or (29) below, where *the don't argue* refers to the gesture of pushing someone away with an outstretched arm and a hand placed on, or in front of, their face, as illustrated in the poster in Figure 1. Although the agent and the one undergoing the event both appear here, the fact that the event is conceptualized as an entity being transferred from the 'doer' to the 'doee' minimizes the violence being done.

29. *before I had sufficiently recovered from the shock, to give him the "don't argue"* (O. Clarke 9/8/1916)

In (27), the bombarder is required to appear as the subject of *give*, but, significantly, those that the bombardment is being done to do not receive explicit mention, and therefore, this construction also downplays the effect of the bombarding that occurred.

Overall, the use of nominals to express verbal events, either by their own or as part of a light verb construction, is another strategy that either distances the human subjects from the events of violence that they are involved in, or even removes them entirely from the linguistic (re)description of the events in question.

Use of Inanimate Nouns in Place of People Involved:
One final category we found that serves to minimize the involvement of humans in the (re)descriptions of violence in the corpus are instances where inanimate nouns are used where an animate noun is expected. This often surfaces in situations where the guns themselves are framed as being responsible for the shooting rather than whoever is actually firing the weapon. For example, in (30) and (31), we find that it is the naval guns that are doing the shooting, not the people aboard the boats controlling the guns; it is Gammage's gun that is doing the sniping, not Gammage himself.

30. *but our naval guns were doing marvellous shooting* (Keown 26/5/1916)
31. *very good sniping from my gun* (Gammage 10/12/1915)

Such phrasing accords with Scarry's assertion that the body of soldiers in war is an extension of the weapon and not the other way around, and again affirms that these writings have a relationship to military discourse evidenced in political and military writing.[52]

As mentioned above, in passive sentences like (19), or (32), where a *by*-phrase is present, the object of *by* tends to be inanimate, being shells in these cases, even though this a role that is prototypically filled by an animate agent responsible for the event.

> 32. *Was in the trenches yesterday when a man named Buckley was killed + four others wounded by a shell* (Devlin 2/9/1915)

Finally, there are accounts in which the people that are affected by the event described are replaced by reference to something inanimate. In (33) it is clear that the hospital tents are occupied, yet it is the tents that are described as being affected. In (34), we find that both the 'bombarder' and the 'bombardee' are referred to by inanimate nouns, even though what is actually happening is that the people on the warships are firing bombs at the people located at Achi Baba.

> 33. *on one occasion Jacko blew our hospital tents into pieces as big as a pocket handkerchief* (Gammage 20/12/1915)
> 34. *Warship bombard Achi Baba for 8 & a half hours with 16 Vessels* (Gammage 4/6/1915)

In conclusion, it is clear that the use of inanimate nouns is another feature of the writing of these soldiers that allows for the people who are actually affected by the death and violence occurring not to be mentioned at all in the way that the events are linguistically described.

The linguistic devices mentioned in this section all ultimately remove people from the descriptions of death and violence, either through complete omission, or by introducing a degree of separation between the people and the violence referred to. Although in some cases, for example with the use of the passive voice and the use of a simplified register, the omissions are only made when it is easily inferred from the context who is involved, the cumulative effect of the structures discussed here is apparent.

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[52] Scarry, "Injury and the Structure of War," 4.

Conclusions

This paper provides a principled linguistic analysis to build on previous literature that seeks to understand either First World War writings or the relationship between the harsh realities of war and the language used to attempt to (re)describe it. Utilizing a corpus (110,000 words from 22 men) that was initially compiled for other reasons, we avoided the possibility of selecting texts that supported predetermined conclusions. However, we acknowledge the potential effect of censorship on what could be written, and potential limitations in terms of the representativeness of writings chosen to be donated to public repositories.[53] Nevertheless these writings constitute valuable evidence regarding how soldiers may have coped with the ubiquity of death and violence they confronted.

Our analysis demonstrates that accounts from Australian soldiers who fought in the First World War regularly minimized the involvement of humans in violence. This was achieved linguistically by downplaying violence through euphemism and metaphor, or using strategies to avoid reference to the people involved. This suggests that a common way for soldiers to attempt to cope with traumatic events was to frame violence as occurring independently from the people that were affected by it. Such indirect descriptions of violence may have allowed the authors to express what would otherwise have been unsayable, being confined to silence in the sense of Winter.[54] Our findings engage with previous scholarship on language and violence, particularly in the context of the First World War, by providing further detail in relation to how specific linguistic features achieve omission and re(description), both describing and avoiding fully describing acts of violence. In addition, we outline a wider range of relevant linguistic constructions than previously discussed. Importantly, we relied on soldiers' informal writings and did not include more formal or literary texts from the public sphere. Furthermore, soldiers were selected from lower ranks and not chosen on the strength of their writing or expressiveness in an attempt to capture something of the common soldier's experience of war. Although these men's experiences are on a very different scale from what is commonly experienced in civil life, our study also seeks to contribute to more general discussions about the relationships between language and violence.

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[53] Thomson, "Anzac Stories: Using Personal Testimony in War History," 19.
[54] Winter, "Thinking about silence."

Acknowledgments

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