

THE ROLE OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN THE MILITARY PROFESSION

Nebojša P. Kljajić¹

Delivered: 22.5.2026.

Language: English

Corrected: 20.8.2026.

Type of paper: Review paper

Accepted: 27.8.2026.

DOI number: 10.5937/vojdelo2603127K

Abstract: The military represents an institution characterized by highly diverse communicative practices, in which, alongside verbal communication, a wide range of nonverbal communicative signs plays an indispensable role. This paper examines nonverbal communication in the military profession by analyzing the dominant forms of nonverbal codes and their meanings, classified into three categories that the scientific and professional literature identifies as paralinguistic, kinesic, and proxemic communicative signs. In addition to these categories, the paper also considers other forms of nonverbal communication that are significant within the military but, due to their distinctive characteristics, cannot be classified within the aforementioned typology of nonverbal symbolic systems. It may therefore be argued that the communicative demands of the military have continuously enriched the repertoire of nonverbal communication codes generated by the specific context and the profound complexity of both peacetime and wartime conditions in which they are employed.

The paper discusses the various implications of nonverbal communication for the effectiveness of military personnel in everyday communication and in the language and style of military commands. Its objective is to emphasize the importance and power of understanding both intentional and spontaneous nonverbal codes in facilitating effective message transmission as well as the accurate interpretation of messages within the superior-subordinate relationship. Furthermore, the study explores the principal characteristics, means, and functions of nonverbal communication within military organizational systems. The paper concludes that this topic has not yet received sufficient attention in the scientific and professional literature and that further empirical research is needed to enhance understanding of this phenomenon, which plays an important role in the everyday functioning of military organizations.

Keywords: *nonverbal communication, military, military commands, paralinguistic, kinesic, proxemic*

¹ University of Defense in Belgrade, Military Academy, Belgrade, Republic of Serbia, e-mail: nebojsa81.bg@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2567-3178>

Introduction

The multidisciplinary nature of the military profession and its inherent complexity require military personnel to master and apply a wide range of communication styles, in which nonverbal communicative codes play an exceptionally important, and often decisive, role. This confirms that communication, in its entirety, extends far beyond the spoken word. The encoding of nonverbal signs and their appropriate functional differentiation are determined by the purpose and context of communication. As the theoretical framework for this study, we adopt the widely accepted typology of nonverbal signs, according to which they are classified as paralinguistic, kinesic, and proxemic (Radojković & Miletić, 2008, p. 46). This approach clearly demonstrates that nonverbal communication encompasses a considerably broader domain than the widely used expression body language, which some authors employ in a way that unjustifiably oversimplifies this form of communication.

The paper examines the nonverbal signs embedded in the language and style of military commands, understood as deliberate, formally standardized, conventional, and rigorously rehearsed codes used within the superior-subordinate relationship. Their diversity is reflected in the fact that, in certain communicative situations, the effective transmission of meaning depends primarily on kinesic codes expressed through various gestures independent of verbal speech, particularly when communication must remain silent. In other situations, paralinguistic features—such as intonation, rhythm, and pauses in speech—provide the clarity, simultaneity, and precision necessary for effective command transmission. Likewise, the spatial, or proxemic, dimension of communication plays a crucial role in ensuring that military commands are both audible and visible, thereby facilitating their accurate interpretation by those receiving them. Guidons, signal flags, as well as visual and acoustic signals, also constitute integral elements of the language and style of military commands, further emphasizing the necessity of employing a broad repertoire of monosemic nonverbal codes in the interest of communicative efficiency. This also highlights the highly specific and demanding professional circumstances in which commanding officers, in addition to relying on the human body as a natural physiological resource, must employ various technical means as indispensable mediators in producing nonverbal signs that convey meaning within the complex interactions characteristic of military service.

In addition to the monosemic character of the nonverbal signs used in military commands, this paper also emphasizes the importance of interpreting spontaneous, unintentional nonverbal cues that accompany everyday communication and serve as valuable indicators of the ontological dimension underlying the attitudes, intentions, and internal states of military personnel. This dichotomy between conventional and spontaneous nonverbal codes reflects both the dynamic nature of military communication and the necessity of distinguishing between their respective communicative functions. It is therefore essential to understand the distinct contexts in which standardized and spontaneous nonverbal signs operate, as they exist in a fundamentally dialectical relationship characterized by opposing communicative purposes.

The paper concludes that the spectrum of nonverbal codes is remarkably broad and that every nuance of nonverbal expression has the potential to shape meaning and influence its interpretation. Consequently, military leaders are expected to possess a high level of communicative and stylistic competence, encompassing the knowledge and skills required both for the effective encoding of messages and for the accurate decoding of the diverse range of nonverbal signs encountered in contemporary military practice. The study further demonstrates that mapping and establishing a comprehensive taxonomy of the manifestations of nonverbal communication and its highly complex network of codes is far from straightforward. Given both the significance of this phenomenon and the potentially severe consequences of errors in the transmission or interpretation of nonverbal messages, this subject is of vital importance to the military profession and calls for a greater awareness of the need for further empirical research. Accordingly, this paper presents the fundamental principles and distinctive characteristics of the nonverbal communication channel within military organizational systems, with the aim of encouraging both researchers and military professionals to devote greater scholarly attention to this important field of study.

Defining Nonverbal Communication

Every human being, including military personnel, continuously emits nonverbal communication codes. When emphasizing the extent to which the nonverbal layer is embedded in everyday communicative practice, scientific and professional literature often refers to the theory of psychologist Albert Mehrabian, a professor of psychology at the University of California, who established as early as 1967 that the contribution of nonverbal communication to overall communication reaches 93 percent. According to this research, body language accounts for as much as 55 percent, while vocal intonation represents 38 percent (Borovac Zekan & Gabrić, 2021, p. 144). It should be acknowledged that this theory has often been justifiably criticized, since it is extremely difficult to measure precisely the specific weight and influence of nonverbal communication on its recipients. This scientific phenomenon, belonging primarily to the field of social sciences and humanities, is more closely associated with a heuristic research approach than with the quantitative values suggested by the simplified mathematical formula proposed in this study. Despite the legitimate critical consideration of these findings, they nevertheless unequivocally highlight the power and significance of nonverbal communication symbols.

The fundamental function of both verbal and nonverbal communication is identical: it is the process of constructing meaning within the sender–receiver relationship. This general understanding of its universal communicative power is also supported by prominent Serbian communication scholars Miroљub Radojković and Mirko Miletić, who argue that the primary communicative function of nonverbal speech, as represented through paralinguistic and extralinguistic symbolic systems, is identical to the basic function of verbal language: both enable the formation of meaningful symbolic units, the encoding and exchange of messages, that is, communication (Radojković

& Miletić, 2008, p. 51). Extralinguistic symbolic systems refer to kinesic and proxemic nonverbal signs, which constitute part of the triad of key categories within the generally accepted typology of nonverbal signs.

When discussing the interrelationship between verbal and nonverbal communication, it can be argued that, depending on the purpose and manner in which nonverbal communication is employed as a stylistically relevant category, it may not only provide words with greater strength and additional persuasive power but may also completely substitute them, as well as enhance their semantic value and emotional colouring. Stuart Tubbs similarly emphasizes the polyvalent nature of the nonverbal message, which functions in one of three ways: it modifies, reinforces, or contradicts the verbal message (Tubbs, 2013, p. 155). The purpose and context of a communicative situation determine the relationship and distribution between nonverbal and verbal signs. This statement should also be considered in relation to the specificity of combat operations as a *sui generis* aspect of the military profession, in which verbal communication must sometimes be completely replaced by nonverbal signs in order to ensure secrecy, security, and communicative effectiveness. It may therefore be concluded that "verbal and nonverbal communication, regardless of being perceived as separate systems, remain mutually dependent," which implies that there is no speech that exists independently of the body, just as the meaning of body language always refers to a symbolic, or linguistic, sign system (Tomić, 2014, p. 154).

In her book *The Art of Communication*, Danijela Petrović defines nonverbal communication as a type of interpersonal communication in which messages are transmitted through means other than words, such as vocalization, facial expressions, gaze, body posture, gestures, artefacts, and others (Petrović, 2009, p. 153). According to Trebješanin and Žikić, nonverbal communication is a specific form of communication through which individuals express and exchange emotions, attitudes, intentions, and desires without words (through gestures, voice, facial expressions, or posture) (Trebješanin & Žikić, 2021, p. 40). Numerous authors from different scientific disciplines have investigated the phenomenon of nonverbal communication. A particularly significant feature of communication studies is the approach according to which nonverbal communication symbols are examined as a far more complex phenomenon than research approaches limited primarily to bodily communication, gestures, or the widespread expression body language. Therefore, it should be emphasized that the code of nonverbal symbols is much richer than body language (Radojković & Miletić, 2008, p. 46), or, as Nušić refers to it, the language of silent organs (Nušić, 1938, p. 126), which further sharpens the distinction between nonverbal communication and body language.

Perhaps the most appropriate approach would be to define what nonverbal communication certainly is not, thereby avoiding the widespread ambiguity and limitations that inevitably arise from attempts to provide an entirely precise definition. In this regard, summarizing the considerations of numerous authors, various sources frequently present a generally accepted understanding of this communicology phenomenon, according to which nonverbal communication refers to communication without words.

However, even this limited definition contains significant shortcomings, since every spoken word contains a nonverbal layer that constitutes the phonological dimension of oral expression—the vocal expression that is never completely stylistically neutral in absolute terms. Thus, words themselves represent integrated and synthetic carriers of a nonverbal layer.

With the intention of clearly positioning our standpoint while acknowledging the aforementioned definitions, it may be argued that everything beyond mere words as isolated semiotic signs, yet functioning as messages whose semantic meaning is governed by codes of human bodily expression, diverse characteristics of the phonological layer, aspects of spatial relations, and numerous other variations through which meaning is conveyed, may be classified within the corpus of nonverbal communicative signs. Accordingly, nonverbal communication codes and signs are constantly present in human interaction and are widely distributed throughout our social environment.

On the other hand, it should be emphasized that not every nonverbal code inherently represents a sign. A nonverbal code becomes a sign only when it possesses referential value and produces an effect. This is also highlighted by Nikola Rot in his book *Signs and Meanings*, where he states that the essential characteristic of a sign is that it stands for something else and thereby points to something or initiates a specific activity—the red traffic light is a sign because it does not merely evoke the perception of the colour red but also represents a warning that the road must not be crossed (Rot, 1982, p. 12). A hand movement may represent a simple physical activity as part of everyday bodily routines and thus possess only a coded designation; however, in another context, it may represent a command, warning, or order requiring a series of precisely defined tasks to be carried out by military personnel, thereby acquiring its full sign value.

Furthermore, although signs and symbols have so far been discussed as equivalents, their nature requires a necessary distinction. Signs perform a univocal function, whereas symbols, although not arbitrary, possess a considerably broader associative field. A symbol is a sign that refers to something that is not visually represented but is understood to be connected with it. It is a sign that points beyond what we see, toward something deeply concealed, always socially agreed upon and adopted within a particular social context (Janjetović, 2007, pp. 50–51).

During verbal communication, multiple nonverbal communication signs are always engaged because words possess their own phonological dimensions, including pitch, intensity, dynamics, tempo, rhythm, and accentuation. They are also accompanied by unavoidable bodily gestures, facial expressions, spatial components, interpersonal distance between interlocutors, and other elements. If oral verbal communication were completely independent and isolated, without the involvement of nonverbal communication layers, the semantic field of words could easily be placed within an incorrect context, because precisely tonal qualities, bodily movements, dynamics, and rhythm as prosodic aspects participate in shaping their interpretation.

The list of nonverbal codes as the broadest set of nonverbal resources is not exhaustive, since communication also incorporates nonverbal symbols such as clothing,

colour, smell, and touch, which often represent important artefacts influencing message decoding within the sender–receiver relationship. Therefore, verbal communication viewed solely as an isolated lexical system lacks the practical capacity to provide complete meaning in every communicative situation and consequently requires nonverbal codes to complement and further clarify it, and in numerous situations to necessarily replace it. It may be concluded that the above explanation supports the thesis that a single universal definition cannot provide a credible scope capable of adequately encompassing the diverse corpus of nonverbal communication codes. Whenever it appears that all forms of nonverbal expression have been identified, the ecosystem of nonverbal communicative signs reveals additional dimensions of its potential and demonstrates the need for further refinement. Therefore, numerous definitions of this concept are necessary, but they remain insufficiently adequate to fully encompass the complexity of this phenomenon.

Characteristics of Military Nonverbal Communication

Within a military organization, it is particularly important not only to provide an appropriate answer to the question of what should be communicated, but also how it should be conveyed. This professional dimension of how significantly influences meaning-making, as well as the security and effectiveness of military communication. Professionalism cannot be conceived separately from communication, and professional communication implies successful communication based on understanding and trust (Stojanović Prelević, 2025, p. 90) within a highly dynamic and complex environment such as the military. Discussing the complexity of the nature of the military profession, Samed Karović, in his book *Command and Leadership*, provides an instructive observation that further supports this argument, stating that every military action is, by its nature, a complex system that demonstrates unpredictable and often chaotic behaviour requiring effective and precise control. Due to these characteristics inherent to the military organization, particularly in the execution of missions and tasks, the language and style of military commands, as well as the relationship between employed verbal and nonverbal signs, must find a way to cope with this inherent complexity (Karović, 2016, p. 31). When discussing style as an essential communicative tool, it is important to highlight the reflections of Jovan Dragašević, a prominent nineteenth-century Serbian officer and the founder of Serbian military stylistic thought, who emphasized that every profession has its own style; and since military relations differ significantly from others, military style is therefore clothed in a distinctive form (Dragašević, 1871, p. 9). When style is understood as a manner of employing sign structures and different possibilities of their realization in the service of communicative effectiveness, nonverbal communication and its specific military form are embodied through a highly diverse repertoire of characteristics, functions, and modes of expression.

In addition to complementing and further strengthening the persuasive power of the verbal layer within military organizations, nonverbal communication is, in numerous communicative situations, an indispensable alternative and often the only chan-

nel serving the security and communicative effectiveness of personnel within military organizational systems. It draws upon a highly diverse inventory of nonverbal signs from the broadly accepted typology that classifies nonverbal codes into paralinguistic, kinesic, and proxemic signs. However, it should be emphasized that the spectrum of military nonverbal codes employed in everyday professional practice is considerably broader. In this regard, when discussing the rich repertoire of manifestations of nonverbal communication, it is illustrative to note that the military uniform itself represents an authentic identity-based nonverbal symbol that legitimizes the military profession. Accordingly, the manner in which it is worn represents a paradigm of the highest professional and moral expectations that society associates with those who wear it. Its symbolic and value-based function demonstrates that the uniform is not merely a communicatively neutral piece of fabric. Dragan Stanar supports this view by noting that the moral dimension of the military uniform, due to its complexity, should be considered from two perspectives—as equally resulting from its practical and symbolic value (Stanar, 2023, p. 5). The military hand salute is also a powerful nonverbal symbol that integrates several military virtues, including respect, discipline, and competence. This particular symbol of military professionalism simultaneously functions as a nonverbal sign because it represents a binding ritualized code manifested through the automatic return of the salute by the superior officer after receiving it from a subordinate. This type of nonverbal code is not a matter of personal choice but rather a compulsory, agreed-upon, and practiced ritual norm in which the civilian vocal greeting is completely replaced by kinesic nonverbal signs.

On the other hand, certain written representations may also be considered within the domain of nonverbal communicative signs and symbols. For example, an operational scheme containing combat tactical symbols replaces numerous words, phrases, and sentence structures in communicating the deployment of friendly and enemy forces. These two nonverbal codes—the military uniform and the operational scheme—although fundamentally different in nature (one being a visual code and the other a written code), do not belong to paralinguistic, kinesic, or proxemic categories. Nevertheless, they are not external to military organizational systems, as they possess strong communicative and semantic effects: the uniform communicates the nature, values, and requirements of the military profession, while the operational scheme communicates the responsibilities of military leaders in preparing and executing combat operations.

It should also be emphasized that a part of the corpus of military nonverbal signs is manifested through technical means. These may include flags, whistles, lamps, signal pistols, and similar devices. In military professional literature, such nonverbal signs are identified by the term signals. According to the Military Lexicon, a signal is a short message of a predetermined form (Vojni leksikon, 1981, p. 533). Examining signals as uncategorized nonverbal signs, Pierre Guiraud concludes in his book *Semiology* that signals differ according to their complexity, degree of structure, and the nature of the signs employed, while they share a strictly monosemic character and a high degree of conventionality that is always explicit and rigid (Guiraud, 1975, p. 58).

If the aforementioned definitions of signals were applied broadly, it could be argued that all military nonverbal signs represent a form of signal, which would unjustifiably simplify the diversity of their characteristics. Therefore, it can be concluded that military communicative practice encompasses a broad spectrum of diverse nonverbal communication codes, confirming both its complexity and the necessity of maintaining alternative communication options depending on the conditions in which communication takes place. If a command cannot be issued verbally, it may be conveyed through a hand movement or a flag; under specific circumstances, the most effective choice may be an acoustic or visual signal.

Although nonverbal communication operates in all directions, two of its expressive dimensions are particularly important for the military. The first relates to the character and functional value of nonverbal signs used in military commands as standardized military codes. The second is diametrically opposite and refers to spontaneous nonverbal codes that naturally accompany human behaviour, including military behaviour, and whose accurate interpretation is valuable to military leaders in understanding the personality and psychological state of military personnel.

A dominant characteristic of military commands is the use of intentional—"artificial or arbitrary" (Rot, 1982, p. 13)—signs functioning as agreed linguistic codes within the superior–subordinate relationship. Every order, as a rule, must be complete, brief, and clear (Životić & Jovović, 1990, p. 27). Ambiguity would lead to disorientation and undermine the possibility of coordinated, synchronized, and uniform action. Different interpretations of communicated information would result in one actor performing one action while another performs something entirely different (Radojković & Miletić, 2008, p. 170).

Therefore, nonverbal communication signs, as an inseparable component of the unified system of issuing, executing, and reporting military commands, are prescribed by regulations and manuals of military branches and services. In addition, standardized international codes are used, particularly in aviation, maritime, and inland waterway operations. It can be argued that military commands frequently incorporate several different nonverbal signs simultaneously.

While issuing a command, an officer stands at attention and communicates the command according to established rules, whereby "the preparatory part of the executive command is delivered more slowly and quietly, while the execution part is delivered faster and louder" (Strojevo pravilo, 2008, p. 17). The officer's uniform as an inherent attribute of the military profession, the location from which the command is issued, and the surrounding space in which the officer is positioned also represent significant communicative messages.

When referring to spontaneous, or as Nikola Rot defines them, natural signs of nonverbal communication, they represent an important diagnostic instrument providing deeper insight into emotions and internal states. The meaning attributed to verbal statements may vary depending on the nonverbal signs that appear simultaneously with them. A complete change in the meaning of a verbal formulation may occur, so that a verbal 'yes' or an affirmative statement accompanied by certain nonverbal signs

becomes a 'no' or a denial of the verbally expressed attitude, whereas without such nonverbal signs it would represent affirmation (Rot, 1982, p. 157).

Paralinguistic Signs

In addition to the semantic function of lexical units, the meaning and interpretation of spoken discourse are shaped by intonation, variations in rhythm, speech dynamics, correct stress placement, and appropriately timed pauses. Together, these nonverbal elements create the coherence and quality of expression necessary for accurate comprehension and persuasive verbal communication. Radojković and Miletić emphasize that the paralinguistic symbolic system consists of so-called nonverbal vocalizations that accompany verbal utterances, such as pauses in speech, voice quality, speech rate, the emphasis placed on particular sounds within words or on words within sentences, loudness, and whispering (Radojković & Miletić, 2008, p. 51). In linguistic and stylistic scholarship, these variations of spoken expression are referred to as prosody, which primarily shapes the stylistic profile of an utterance in the service of communicative effectiveness or, more precisely, intentional purposiveness (Simić & Jovanović Simić, 2015, p. 45).

The accuracy and simultaneous execution of military commands are likewise ensured through the division of commands into two distinct segments, which constitute separate linguistic units differentiated by contrasting prosodic features. This clearly demonstrates that the language and style of military commands do not represent a uniform vocal pattern. Precision and synchronized execution are achieved through elements of spoken punctuation, including vocal nuances, precisely timed pauses, emphasis on those parts of commands delivered more rapidly, and words or syllables pronounced more quietly and at a slower pace. Consequently, meaning is shaped not only by the semantic scope of lexical items but also through the appropriate use of nonverbal signs realized within the phonological layer, which constitutes an intrinsic feature of paralinguistic communication.

In *Military Lexis and Terminology*, Vladan Jovanović notes that the emphasis placed on particular parts of a command and the prolonged pronunciation of certain segments serve to distinguish the preparatory part of the command from its executive part, thereby ensuring the successful execution of the ordered action. For example, in the command **Atten-TION!**, the first, less emphasized syllable and its slightly prolonged pronunciation provide the soldier with just enough time to prepare for the execution of the action before the following stressed syllable or command segment is pronounced (Jovanović, 2016, p. 254). Accordingly, the Drill Regulations of the Serbian Armed Forces present military commands using distinctive graphostylistic devices. Executive commands are divided into syllables or command segments separated by a hyphen; the preparatory part is written in lowercase letters, whereas the executive part is highlighted in bold uppercase letters and followed by an exclamation mark. These graphostylistic conventions perform an important pragmatic function by ena-

bling military personnel to readily identify and distinguish the preparatory component from the executive component of a command.

The standardized code embedded in the language and style of military commands may also have an international character. This is particularly evident in aviation units during communication between two aircraft, namely an interceptor aircraft and the intercepted aircraft. Examples of these standardized phrases and their prescribed pronunciation are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 *Extract from the List of Phrases and Pronunciations Used During Interception Note. Adapted from Pravilnik o letenju, 2018 (Regulations on the flight), No. 14 (2018), p. 270.*

INTERCEPTOR			INTERCEPTED AIRCRAFT		
Phrase	Pronunciation	Meaning	Phrase	Pronunciation	Meaning
Call Sign	<u>KOL</u> SA-IN	What is your call sign?	CALL SIGN (Call Sign)	<u>KOL</u> SA-IN	My call sign is (call sign)!
Follow	<u>FOL</u> -LO	Follow me!	WILCO	<u>VILL</u> -KO	Understood, and I will carry out!
Descend	DEE-SEND	Descend for landing!	CAN NOT	<u>KANN</u> NOTT	I cannot execute

With the aim of ensuring comprehensibility as a measure of communicative efficiency, the syllables that require emphasis are underlined, while entropy, as a measure of uncertainty in the pronunciation of military command language phrases, has zero tolerance.

Kinesic Signs

Kinesic signs (Greek kinesis – movement) are named as such because their distinctive feature is movement, either of individual body parts or of the body as a whole (Todorović, 2010, p. 194). This type of unambiguous sign is referred to by Trebješanin and Žikić in their book Nonverbal Communication as emblems (Trebješanin & Žikić, 2021, p. 29). In addition to supporting the persuasiveness of oral expression, gestural language (Bugarski, 1996, p. 22) is particularly present and significant in the language and style of military commands when communication is covert and optical visibility exists, allowing commands to be issued silently, without the use of spoken messages.

In such situations, the movement of the hand or other body parts represents an executive command issued by a superior to a subordinate. This type of standardized nonverbal sign of a ritual character has found its place in the military as a reserve communication channel, further confirming that effective communication in military environments must always have an alternative.

An example can be found in standard operating procedures in aviation in cases of radio communication failure during communication between an interceptor and an

intercepted aircraft. In such circumstances, kinesic signs are defined through international standardization and apply to all participants in air traffic.

Interception of an Aircraft Experiencing Radio Communication Failure

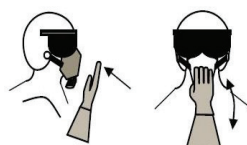
Radio Reception Problem

Touch the headset with an open hand and then move the hand back and forth in the area around the ears.



Radio Transmission Problem

Touch the microphone with an open hand and then move the hand up and down in front of the face.



System Problem

To indicate the nature of the problem, hold a closed fist at eye level and then indicate the type of problem by displaying the corresponding number of extended fingers.



Extract from the Overview of Selected Visual Signals During the Interception of an Aircraft Experiencing Radio Communication Failure Note.

Adapted from Pravilnik o letenju, 2018 (Regulation on the Flight of Military Aircraft of the Republic of Serbia), No. 14 (2018), p. 276.

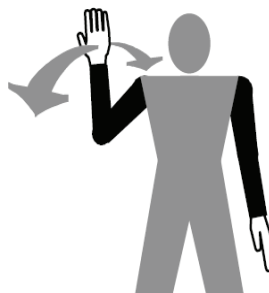
Hand movements as a form of kinesic nonverbal communication also have an important role during the inspection of the configuration of combat vehicles and aircraft prior to mission execution, as well as during their proper and safe parking and repositioning.

When referring to military aircraft, communication takes place between the signalman (marshaller), who is positioned on the airport maneuvering area, and the pilot located in the cockpit. In this situation, voice communication is impossible due to engine noise, and communication is conducted through standardized international ICAO (The International Civil Aviation Organization) signals.

TURN RIGHT

DAY: Left arm pointing downward; the right arm is moved rapidly upward and backward. The speed of the arm movement indicates the rate of turn.

NIGHT: The same as the daytime signal, using illuminated wands held in extension of the arm. This signal is used for turning hovering aircraft in position.



NOSE DOWN / MOVE FORWARD

DAY: Arms slightly apart, palms facing backward; repeatedly move the arms backward at shoulder height.

NIGHT: The same as the daytime signal, using illuminated wands held as an extension of the arms.



Overview of Selected General Aircraft Signals on Maneuvering Areas

Source: Pravilnik o letenju, 2018 (Regulation on the Flight Operations of Military Aircraft of the Republic of Serbia), No. 14 (2018), p. 284.

Kinesic signs of nonverbal communication expressed through hand movements or movements of other body parts also play a significant role in Ground Forces units, particularly in special forces during combat operations when their personnel are in direct contact with enemy forces. In such situations, it is essential that commands and reports on their execution remain silent in order to avoid revealing positions and to further ensure secrecy during the execution of rapid, unambiguous, and highly sensitive procedures within the process of command and control.

Furthermore, since verbal communication is impossible underwater, unified and strictly standardized hand movements are of vital importance during the execution of military divers' tasks as well.

Proxemic Signs

This term, coined by Edward Hall, refers to the phenomenon of space, proximity, and distance established among participants in communication (Tomić, 2014, p. 150).

In order to ensure effective communication during the issuing of commands, military regulations and manuals clearly define the positions occupied by commanders and leaders in relation to their subordinates. Appropriate positioning has pragmatic value because it ensures the necessary audibility and visibility. These two aspects play an important role in the correct and unambiguous understanding of commands.

As an example, we can highlight the position of a squad leader when issuing commands to a rifle squad formed in a two-rank formation. Figure 1 shows that the squad leader's position is opposite the center of the formation, with the distance from the first rank precisely defined as five paces.

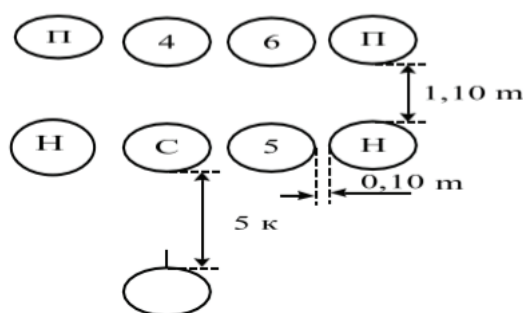


Figure 1 Rifle Squad Formed in a Two-Rank Formation

Source: Strojevo pravilo (Drill Regulations of the Serbian Armed Forces), (2008), p. 68.

Another illustrative example confirming the necessity of clearly defining spatial positioning is the marshaller who directs the movement of a military aircraft on the maneuvering areas of an airfield. "The signalman (marshaller) occupies the following positions:

- a) for aircraft, in front of the left wingtip within the pilot's field of vision;
 - b) for helicopters, at a position where they can be best observed by the pilot"
- (Pravilnik o letenju, No. 14, 2018, p. 280).

Within the process of command and control, military regulations and manuals unambiguously define the position, mutual distance, and spatial relationship between commanders/leaders and their subordinates, which undoubtedly serves the purpose of productive communication. Military leaders also have a specific position and role during military collective meetings and internal briefings.

On the other hand, the spatial arrangement of friendly and enemy forces within a combat formation can also be considered an important proxemic sign, as it provides an unambiguous indication of further activities in the decision-making process.

Spontaneous – Natural Nonverbal Signs in Everyday Military Communication Practice

Correct interpretation of natural, spontaneous nonverbal signs is important from the perspective of understanding subordinates. Through minor signs, a superior can gain significant insights not only into what a person thinks and what is present in their

consciousness, but also into their unconscious intentions and emotions. Spontaneous gestures and their emotional colouring reveal a soldier's readiness to perform tasks and may also identify problems and internal dilemmas.

In his book *Body Language*, James Borg states: The inevitable fact is that our nonverbal actions reveal our moods and feelings, much more than we might want to show. Therefore, congruence is necessary if we are to believe the message that people convey to us (Borg, 2022, pp. 14–15).

For military leaders, numerous spontaneous nonverbal codes actually function as signs because they clearly indicate something, are not accidental, and often even silence can be loud and carry polyvalent implications. The verbal content of a message may contradict the meaning produced by nonverbal communication signs. Therefore, it is of great importance that commanders possess the competencies required to correctly interpret these nonverbal signs as clear indicators of the state of the human and spiritual capital of military personnel.

In this context, Drago Vulinović, in his book *Nonverbal Behaviour*, notes: I have always perceived body movements as indicators of a person's character traits and level of cultivation (Vulinović, 2023: 9). Also instructive is the statement by Trebješanin and Žikić that it is important to carefully listen to the voice, its colour and pitch, because it reveals personality, its aspirations, and its current affective state (Trebješanin & Žikić, 2021, p. 54).

Paralinguistic nonverbal communication is a source of numerous forms of information. Ksenija Đurić Atanasievski emphasizes that certain emotions, and even personality traits, can be assessed based on voice characteristics. Fear and anger are emotions that can easily be identified through paralinguistic symbols. Courage and caution can also be assessed on the basis of these signs (Đurić Atanasievski, 2017, p. 136).

Numerous highly sensitive situations encountered by military personnel imply the necessity of maintaining faith in victory and the purpose of combat, which is continuously reflected through body movements and facial expressions as silent forms of communication that provide full meaning in the construction of interpretation.

It can therefore be concluded that spontaneous nonverbal communication signs continuously emit a broad field of meanings, including in numerous communicative situations that are not regulated by standardized codes defined in military regulations and manuals.

Conclusion

Nonverbal communication and its pragmatic, polyvalent functionality are integrated into all segments of the life and work of military personnel across all branches and services. The military represents an institution characterized by highly diverse communicative practices, in which, alongside verbal linguistic signs, the features of nonverbal communicative codes occupy a significant position.

The role of nonverbal communication and its implications for the military profession have been primarily presented within the framework of the language and style of military commands, through an analysis of the characteristics of nonverbal signs identified in scientific and professional literature as paralinguistic, kinesic, and proxemic communicative signs. We have also identified numerous nonverbal signs that, according to their nature, cannot be classified within the generally accepted typology of nonverbal communication layers, yet play an important role and have wide application within military organizational systems.

In addition to conscious nonverbal communication codes, we have emphasized the importance of correctly interpreting spontaneous and involuntary nonverbal signals, which are essential for properly understanding the ontological—internal—component of members of military organizational systems. It has been confirmed that nonverbal communication represents a considerably broader field than the phrase body language, by which this type of communication is unjustifiably simplified by some authors. The most significant characteristics, means, and functions of nonverbal communication within military organizational systems have been presented. On the other hand, the necessary distinction between the terminological definition of a nonverbal sign and the frequently used expressions nonverbal symbols and nonverbal code has also been emphasized.

Contemporary technological innovations will not dramatically alter the role of the highly diverse inventory of nonverbal communication signs within the military profession. All innovations change things, but they do not transform them fundamentally. Regardless of the technological advancement that is currently accelerating rapidly, driven by the requirements of military organizations in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, human beings remain the most valuable military resource.

Even in situations where emerging technologies seek to replace soldiers on the battlefield, it remains necessary to train operators of these sophisticated systems, because their further practical application is exploited and controlled by the human factor. This is impossible without productive communication as a process of constructing reality, within whose architecture nonverbal communication signs are deeply embedded.

Wars of the new generation will continue to represent a paradigm of the highly sensitive and dynamic nature of nonverbal communication at all levels of command and control, both in peacetime and wartime conditions.

References

- [1] Borg, J. (2022). *Govor tela* [Body language]. Sezam book.
- [2] Borovac Zekan, S., & Gabrić, K. (2021). Neverbalna komunikacija kao alat uvjeravanja u javnom nastupu [Nonverbal communication as a persuasion tool in public speaking]. *Zbornik radova Veleučilišta u Šibeniku*, 15(3–4), 143–158. <https://doi.org/10.51650/ezrvs.15.3-4.11>

- [3] Bugarski, R. (1996). *Uvod u opštu lingvistiku* [Introduction to general linguistics]. Čigoja štampa.
- [4] Dragašević, J. (1871). *Vojnička stilistika* [Military stylistics]. Geca Kon.
- [5] Đurić Atanasievski, K. (2017). *Komuniciranje i odnosi s javnošću* [Communication and public relations]. Medija centar „Obrana“.
- [6] Giro, P. (1975). *Semiologija* [Semiology]. Bigz.
- [7] Janjetović, Lj. (2007). Globalni znakovi i lokalna značenja [Global signs and local meanings]. *Znakovi i poruke: časopis iz komunikologije* [Signs and Messages: A Journal of Communication], 1(1), 47–59. <https://kfbl.edu.ba/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/ZiP-I-1-07I.pdf>
- [8] Jovanović, V. (2016). *Srpska vojna leksika i terminologija* [Serbian military lexis and terminology]. Institut za srpski jezik SANU.
- [9] Karović, S. (2016). *Komandovanje i rukovođenje* [Command and management]. Medija centar „Obrana“.
- [10] Nušić, B. (1938). *Retorika* [Rhetoric]. Geca Kon A.D.
- [11] Petrović, D. (2009). *Umešnost komuniciranja* [The skill of communication]. Klio.
- [12] *Pravilnik o letenju vojnih vazduhoplova Republike Srbije* [Regulations on the flight of military aircraft of the Republic of Serbia]. (2018). Službeni vojni list, br. 14, Ministarstvo odbrane Republike Srbije.
- [13] Radojković, M., & Miletić, M. (2008). *Komuniciranje, mediji i društvo* [Communication, media and society]. Učiteljski fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu.
- [14] Rot, N. (1982). *Znakovi i značenja* [Signs and meanings]. Nolit.
- [15] Simić, R., & Jovanović Simić, J. (2015). *Opšta stilistika* [General stylistics]. Jasen.
- [16] Stanar, D. (2023). Moralna dimenzija vojne uniforme [The moral dimension of the military uniform]. *Vojno delo*, 75(2), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.5937/vojdela2302001S>
- [17] Stojanović Prelević, I. (2025). Profesionalni identitet i komunikacijska odgovornost zaposlenih u vojsci [Professional identity and communication responsibility of military employees]. *Vojno delo*, 77(2), 89–101. <https://doi.org/10.5937/vojdela2502089S>
- [18] *Strojevo pravilo Vojske Srbije* [Drill regulations of the Serbian Armed Forces]. (2008). Generalštab Vojske Srbije.
- [19] Todorović, I. (2010). Neverbalna komunikacija u učionici [Nonverbal communication in the classroom]. *Norma*, (2), 191–200. udk: 81'221:371.621.4
- [20] Tomić, Z. (2014). *Razumevanje i nesporazum* [Understanding and misunderstanding]. Čigoja štampa.
- [21] Trebješanin, Ž., & Žikić, B. (2021). *Neverbalna komunikacija* [Nonverbal communication]. Agape.
- [22] Tubbs, S. (2013). *Komunikacija – principi i konteksti* [Human communication: Principles and contexts]. Klio.
- [23] *Vojni leksikon* [Military lexicon]. (1981). Vojnoizdavački zavod.
- [24] Vulinović, D. (2023). *Neverbalno ponašanje* [Nonverbal behavior]. Čigoja štampa.
- [25] Životić, R., & Jovović, B. (1990). *Jezik i stil ratne veštine* [Language and style of the art of war]. Centar visokih vojnih škola OS „Maršal Tito“.

Summary

The productivity of a military organization depends on numerous factors, among which the importance of effective communication should be emphasized. The military represents an institution characterized by highly diverse and sensitive communicative practices, in which, alongside verbal linguistic codes, a valuable role is played by a diverse inventory of nonverbal communicative signs that are differentiated according to the purpose and context of communication. Nonverbal signs constitute a constructive element of the persuasiveness of verbal communication. On the other hand, this paper highlights that the specificity of the military profession is also reflected in numerous communicative situations in which nonverbal communication is necessary as a reserve, and often the only effective and secure communicative option.

Nonverbal communication was examined through the analysis of paralinguistic, kinesic, and proxemic signs. A number of nonverbal codes that cannot be classified within this generally accepted typology of nonverbal communication signs were also identified, indicating that nonverbal communication encompasses a considerably broader context than the concept of body language alone. This further confirms its multilayered nature within the sender–receiver relationship.

The aim of this paper is to raise awareness among military personnel regarding the importance of correctly understanding nonverbal communication signs, both from the perspective of message transmission and message reception. Although nonverbal communication operates in all directions, two of its expressive dimensions are of particular importance for the military. The first refers to the character and functional value of nonverbal signs in the process of command and control as a standardized, unambiguous military code. The second is diametrically opposite and represents an immediate, spontaneous nonverbal code that faithfully accompanies human nature, including military personnel, and whose meaning and accurate interpretation are valuable for military leaders in recognizing the ontological dimension of military personality.

Through this study, it has been confirmed that the military profession represents a domain of highly complex, dynamic, and diverse nonverbal communication signs, which are applied across all branches and services of the armed forces.

Keywords: *nonverbal communication, military, military commands, paralinguistic, kinesic, proxemic*

© 2026 The Author. Published by Vojno delo (<http://www.vojnodelo.mod.gov.rs>). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

