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# STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION(S) – KAKŠNA JE RAZLIKA?

## STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION(S) - WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

**Povzetek**   Članek temelji na terminološkem pristopu k dilemi glede tega, kako razlikovati med angleškima zvezama *strategic communications* in *strategic communication* in ali je to sploh potrebno. Na podlagi različnih kontekstov je v članku tematika obravnavana z jezikoslovnega in terminološkega stališča, pri čemer je pojasnjenih nekaj temeljnih terminoloških pojmov, ki so potrebni za razumevanje analize, ki sledi. Cilj članka je s terminološkim pristopom ugotoviti, ali zvezi delujeta kot sinonima ali kot dva različna koncepta in ali je sploh mogoče postaviti jasno ločnico.

**Ključne besede**   *Terminologija, koncept, strateško komuniciranje, strateške komunikacije, Nato.*

**Abstract**   This article is based on a terminological approach to the dilemma of how to differentiate between the phrases *strategic communications* and *strategic communication*, and whether it is necessary. On the basis of different contexts, it approaches the subject from a linguistic and terminological point of view, defining some basic terminological terms to assist the reader in understanding the analysis which follows. With this terminological approach it aims to establish whether, in practice, the two phrases function as synonyms or as two different concepts, and whether a clear-cut line can be established.

**Key words**   *Terminology, concept, strategic communication, strategic communications, NATO.*

**Introduction**   This article results from an attempt to translate the term NATO's Strategic Communications concept into Slovene, and the dilemma of whether or not, and how, to differentiate the plural form of the phrase that NATO uses from the singular version of the phrase, which is also in use in other contexts. At first glance, the terms *strategic communication* and *strategic communications* appear to refer to one and

the same concept, and a discussion about the difference between them may seem to be unnecessary hair-splitting. However, the attempt to identify the differences between the two phrases makes more sense when we approach the subject from a linguistic point of view.

In this article, we deal with an analysis of the definitions and concepts lying behind both versions of the phrase in different contexts, and attempts to identify whether the terms indeed differ in concept or they co-exist as synonyms. Its aim is not to go into the depth of the theory of communication(s) as this is in the domain of communication(s) experts. We will approach the subject from a linguistic and terminological perspective, although, to a certain extent, an analysis of the substance and content of the concepts will be inevitable.

In the first part, the article outlines the general dilemma arising from the co-existence and, sometimes, co-occurrence of the terms *strategic communication* and *strategic communications*. It begins by explaining the basic terminological notions and aspects to facilitate an understanding of this challenge and analysis. The theory of terminology is followed by an analysis of the contexts in which both phrases occur, and an explanation of the concepts behind them. The final part of the article comprises the arguments of authors who do differentiate between the two phrases as two different concepts, as well as those who claim that the phrases are synonymous and designate one single concept. Our research was based on the analysis of publicly available literature, relevant documents, and other publicly available information, focusing primarily on NATO's Strategic Communications concept.

## 1   DEFINING THE PROBLEM

When attempting to translate the term NATO's Strategic Communications into Slovene, we encountered a dilemma of whether or not NATO's *strategic communications* (plural), which at first glance resembles the notion of *strategic communication* (singular), was indeed the same concept or was it different enough to be translated by a different term. In the spirit of NATO's approach to terminology, as explained by Folkert Zijlstra, who said that terminology management should serve to complement and support all the efforts to enhance the 'interoperability' of the Alliance (Žnidarič, 2018), we decided to explore the dilemma and try to identify a solution. When looking at the available literature, it soon became clear that there was little consensus about which version of the term should be used, whether or not the phrases were synonymous, and what were the possible differences between them. Christopher Paul, for example, claims that there are many different definitions of strategic communication and many different understandings of those definitions, and no agreement on whether it is *strategic communication* or *strategic communications* with an "s" at the end (Paul, 2011). In this view, he enjoys the company of Murphy (2008) and other authors. On the other hand, however, there are experts who see a clear difference between the two forms and defend the use of one or the other and a differentiation between the two; however, not all of them follow the same direction.

## 2 INTRODUCTION TO BASIC TERMINOLOGY CONCEPTS

In order to be able to better grasp the challenge of defining a possible difference between the phrases *strategic communication* and *strategic communications*, it is important to understand some basic principles of the theory of terminology. This is an extensive subject area and could be broadly discussed in an independent article or several of them. The information contained here, however, will explain only some of the basic terminology ideas, and will be as detailed as is necessary for a reader with little or no knowledge of terminology to understand the analysis which will follow.

The fundamental elements of terminology work are *the concept*, *the designation* and *the definition* (NATO STANDARD AAP-77). The three notions can be graphically represented in the triangle of reference (Figure 1), also known as the semiotic or semantic triangle or the "Ogden and Richards' triangle", as it was famously depicted by these authors in their book "The Meaning of Meaning". This triangle is a simplified explanation of how linguistic symbols are related to the objects they represent, and is sometimes also represented as a tetrahedron with the "definition" as the fourth vertex (Kudashev and Kudasheva, 2010). Grosjean very well explains that the human mind abstracts and conceptualizes all the objects sharing the same properties, which means that they are grouped according to their most significant characteristics and assigned to a corresponding mental image – the concept (2009, p 16). In NATO STANDARD AAP-77, the concept is defined as "a mental representation of something that can be considered a unit of knowledge" (2018, p 9). Eventually, this concept is denoted by a linguistic sign or symbol.



Figure 1: Triangle of reference (McCreary, 2006)
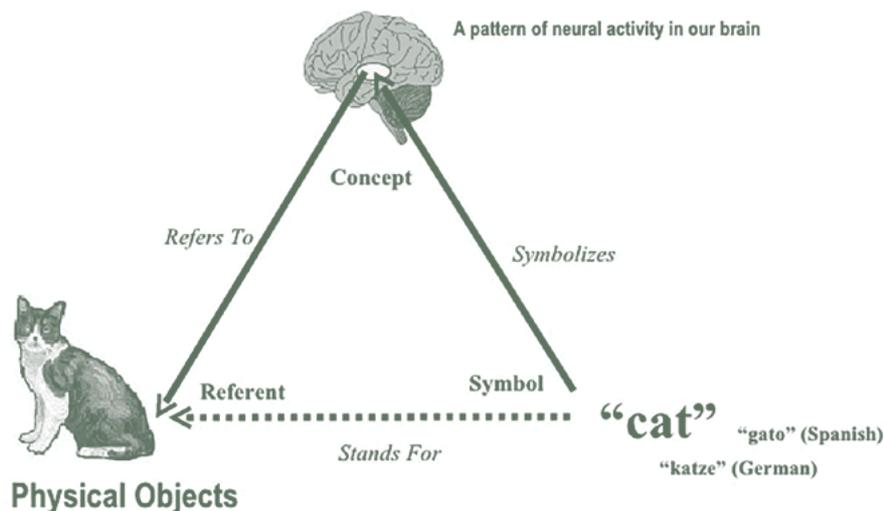
Ogden, C. K., & Richards, I. A. (1923) *The Meaning of Meaning*

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Considering the crucial role of the concept in the classification and naming of objects, Grosjean claims that terminology, as its designation implies, is not about terms in the first place, but about the identification of the corresponding concepts, and that any terminology work should therefore be based on concepts and not on terms (2009, p 17).

In the case of our analysis, it is also important to consider these facts in a communicative context. The triangle represented in Figure 1 depicts the perception of one person, while communication takes place between two or more people, each with their own respective triangles of reference. In order to ensure "interoperability" between them, it is therefore important that these two or more triangles contain the same elements and are synchronized, i.e. that a certain symbol (word/term) refers to the same concept and the same referent. If this is not the case, our communication attempts are doomed to failure because of misconceptions and ambiguity. The misunderstanding in this context can be attributed to two main factors:

1.  Individuals talk about the same concept, but each one uses a different word/term (synonymy),

    or

2.  They use the same word/term, but each of them refers to a different concept and, hence, a different object (homonymy) (Grosjean, 2009, p 36)

The aim of our analysis will be to identify the concepts behind each of the two phrases in different contexts, and to try to ascertain possible synonymy or homonymy.

## 3   STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS (PLURAL)

As already mentioned, the starting point and the basis for this article was NATO's Strategic Communications concept and its translation into Slovene; hence, this will be the first concept we will look into. NATO has opted for the plural version of the phrase and uses it consistently in all its key documents regulating the field of NATO *Strategic Communications*. NATO defines *strategic communications* as "the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities, Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, Military Public Affairs, Information Operations and Psychological Operations, as appropriate in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims" (PO (2009) 0141, NATO StratCom Policy). According to the explanation provided by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Latvia (StratCom COE), NATO opted for the plural form based on the fact that "a large part of the English-speaking world outside of the NATO military already use strategic communications with an "s" at the end. For example, King's College London, Chatham House, RAND, Cambridge University..." (Curika, 2019). The official argumentation of NATO's

choice has still not been published; however, NATO StratCom COE is currently running a terminology project, which will publish the results of its efforts in the upcoming months.

In official documents, NATO does not differentiate between the singular and the plural terminology. However, Wing Commander Peter Clarke from the Communications Division, SHAPE/NATO, does see a difference between the two phrases. According to his perception both concepts are needed in the same context, where the phrase "*strategic communications*" denotes the deliberate information activities we do in the physical, virtual and cognitive domains to create the perceptions, attitudes and behaviours we desire (what is said and done), while the phrase "*strategic communication*" would imply the effects we have (what our audiences see and hear) (Clarke, 2019).

Chatham House is another example of an entity using the plural version of the term, and it served as the basis informing NATO's terminology. In the Chatham House Report "Strategic Communications and National Strategy", *strategic communications* is defined as "a systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational and tactical levels, that enables understanding of target audiences and identifies effective conduits to promote and sustain particular types of behaviour" (Chatham House, 2011, p 4), also acknowledging that it comprises four main components: information operations, psychological operations, public diplomacy, and public affairs (ibid). Clearly, Chatham House adopted a similar definition of *strategic communications* to NATO, also using the plural form of the phrase consistently. However, when we further explored some of the cited sources, we found certain discrepancies. At some points in the Chatham House Report, where, generally, terminology is synchronized and consistent, certain citations differ from the originals. One such example is the definition from the White House "National Framework for Strategic Communication", cited in the Chatham Report using the plural phrase *strategic communications* (Chatham House, 2011, p 5), whereas the original document in its title and the majority of the document contains the singular version of the term – *strategic communication* (White House, 2010). This again raises doubts about a clear differentiation between the two forms on the part of the Chatham House researchers in terms of concept, and invites a suspicion that they consider the terms as synonymous. What is more, when reviewing the White House report, it became evident that even the authors of the White House document did not use the singular version of the phrase consistently. Moreover, by using the combined form *strategic communication(s)* in their definition, they implicitly admitted that they themselves were not able to resolve the dilemma of which version to use. The two phrases were obviously treated as synonyms: "By 'strategic communication(s)' we refer to: (a) the synchronization of words and deeds and how they will be perceived by selected audiences, as well as (b) programs and activities deliberately aimed at communicating and engaging with intended audiences, including those implemented by public affairs, public diplomacy, and information operations professionals." (White House, 2010, p 2)

King's College, another resource informing NATO's terminological decision, also uses the plural form of the phrase consistently in offering their MA in Strategic Communications. On the basis of their introductory website, their Master's programme provides knowledge of "how states and their governments communicate in international politics and how they shape long term strategies in a range of fields from military to diplomatic to aid and development. This includes preparing for conflict between states or with insurgent groups, communicating a path during hostilities, transitioning through post-conflict situations and also how states use diplomacy, culture and economics to manage the peace and avoid conflict and engage in treaty and trade negotiations."

The terminology of the RAND Corporation, however, which is an organization with 1,850 employees from fifty countries (Rand.org, 2019), varies by author and project. Christopher Paul, for example, a senior social scientist at the RAND Corporation from its Pittsburg Office, uses the singular form of the phrase, clearly stating that as a US citizen, he takes the perspective of the US government and the US approach (2011, p 2). However, he warns of the lack of consensus regarding its definition. According to Paul, the term *strategic communication* denotes "coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signalling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of national objectives" (2011, p 3). A group of French authors, on the other hand, who prepared a report on the relevance of NATO's strategic communications concept for France, published within RAND, consistently use the plural form of the phrase (Reding et al., 2010) using NATO's definition, which is a logical consequence of the fact that they deal with an analysis of NATO's approach. Interestingly, unlike some other sources their report does include a chapter on terminology; however, it never questions it from the linguistic perspective, only from a substantive one.

## 4 STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION (SINGULAR)

The singular version of the phrase is used in a large proportion of US governmental documents regulating the field in question, e.g. the National Framework for Strategic Communication (White House, 2010), or the US National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication (2007), although some of them may seem to differ from NATO's concept, since they do not incorporate public diplomacy (e.g. the US National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication). The definition from the White House report has already been noted above, while the US National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication does not really offer a clear definition, but implies one in the following statement: "*Public diplomacy and strategic communication should always strive to support our nation's fundamental values and national security objectives*" (2007, p 2).

The singular version of the phrase is also consistently used by the authors and editors of the International Journal of Strategic Communication, which in 2016, according to the renowned SCOPOS ranking of academic journals, ranked 33 in the overall

list of communication journals[1]. In the first issue of the journal, Hallahan et al. defined strategic communication as "*the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission" (2007, p 3)*, noting that "*strategic communication is about informational, persuasive, discursive, as well as rational communication when used in a context of the achievement of an organization's mission*" (2007, p 17), and adding that "*strategic communication focuses on how the organization itself presents and promotes itself through the intentional activities of its leaders, employees, and communications practitioners"* (2007, p 7). Verčič, one of the authors of the article and a renowned communication(s) expert, in this respect warns of substantial terminological confusion and inconsistencies and claims that both phrases are synonymous. Nevertheless, he defends the use of the singular form of the phrase common in the United States of America (USA), which he supports with the argument of James Grunig that the plural form "communications" was imported from marketing and refers more to the tools (Verčič, 2019).

In their article (Zerfass et al, 2018), Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft and Werder admit the conceptual fuzziness and lack of a proper definition of the concept, highlighting four different understandings of strategic communication. For the purpose of this analysis, we will look at the third field of the use they identify, i.e. *military and national power* (Zerfass et al, 2018, p 489). In this respect, the authors cite Evgeny Pashentsev, a Russian expert, who defines strategic communication as "the state's projection of certain strategic values, interests and goals into the conscience of domestic or foreign audiences by means of adequate synchronization of multifaceted activities in all the domains of social life with professional communication support" (2018, p 489). They continue by citing NATO's Strategic Communications Concept[2] and admitting that "strategic communication as an integral part of warfare is widely neglected by communication science, probably due to the negative notions of information warfare and propaganda" (2018, p 489). In the same context, they evoke public diplomacy as a separate notion, which is in the real world closely connected to military communication.

Christopher Paul of RAND also generally defends the use of "*strategic communication*" in governmental contexts. His arguments, however, are different, since he considers the two phrases more as two different concepts, and not so much as synonyms. According to Paul, the plural form of the phrase comes from industry and constitutes part of public relations. Nevertheless, he admits that *strategic communication* used in a governmental context has some overlaps with *strategic communications*, although, in his opinion, industry (using the plural form of the phrase) focuses more on messages, media and public relations, while the many perspectives on government strategic communication include actions as important sources of images, messages and signals (Paul, 2011). In a similar spirit, Ted Tzavelas explained that before the

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[1]  *http://euprera.org/2016/07/05/where-next-for-european-communication-euprera/*

[2]  *Perhaps unintentionally, but still interestingly, citing its title with a singular form of the term Strategic Communication, while the original version uses the plural form Strategic Communications.*

concept of *strategic communication* was adopted and defined in the USA and the US military, "public affairs had used the term '*strategic communications*' – plural – but limited the meaning of that term to informing, not influencing" (Farewell, 2012).

There is, obviously, a thin line of difference between the concepts denoting "*strategic communications*" and "*strategic communication*". The following table provides a more manageable overview of the aforementioned definitions and concepts, and enables a more systematic look at the differences in their definitions and use of the terminology:

| AUTHOR | TERM | DEFINITION | DIFFERENTIATION between singular and plural |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. NATO | Strategic communications | The coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities, Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, Military Public Affairs, Information Operations and Psychological Operations, as appropriate in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims. | **NO** but P. Clarke (SHAPE): the phrase "*strategic communications*" denotes the deliberate information activities we do in the physical, virtual and cognitive domains to create the perceptions, attitudes and behaviours we desire (what is said and done), while the phrase "*strategic communication*" would imply the effects we have. |
| 2. Chatham House | Strategic communications | A systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational and tactical levels, that enables understanding of target audiences and identifies effective conduits to promote and sustain particular types of behaviour/…/ /…/ comprises four main components: information operations; psychological operations, public diplomacy, and public affairs. | **NO** (inconsistencies in citing – pointing to the fact that they treat the terms as synonymous) |
| 3. Reding et al. (RAND) | Strategic communications | Using NATO's definition | **NO** |
| 4. King's College | Strategic communications | How states and their governments communicate in international politics and how they shape long term strategies in a range of fields from military to diplomatic to aid and development. This includes preparing for conflict between states or with insurgent groups, communicating a path during hostilities, transitioning through post-conflict situations and also how states use diplomacy, culture and economics to manage the peace and avoid conflict and engage in treaty and trade negotiations. | **NO** |

| AUTHOR | TERM | DEFINITION | DIFFERENTIATION between singular and plural |
|---|---|---|---|
| 5. White House | Strategic communication | By 'strategic communication(s)' we refer to: (a) the synchronization of words and deeds and how they will be perceived by selected audiences, as well as (b) programs and activities deliberately aimed at communicating and engaging with intended audiences, including those implemented by public affairs, public diplomacy, and information operations professionals. | **NO** (implicitly admits the terminological confusion and synonymy) |
| 6. C. Paul (RAND) | Strategic communication | Coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signalling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of national objectives. | **YES** *Strategic communications* comes from industry and constitutes a part of public relations. *-Strategic communication* used in governmental context has some overlaps with *strategic communications*, although industry (using the plural form of the phrase) focuses more on messages, media and public relations, while the many perspectives on government strategic communication include actions as important sources of images, messages and signals (Paul, 2011). |
| 7. US National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication | Strategic communication | Public diplomacy and strategic communication should always strive to support our nation's fundamental values and national security objectives. | **NO** Differentiates between public diplomacy and strategic communication, which NATO considers as a single concept. |
| 8. Hallal et al. (IJSC, 2007) | Strategic communication | The purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission. Strategic communication focuses on how the organization itself presents and promotes itself through the intentional activities of its leaders, employees, and communications practitioners" | **NO** |
| 9. Zerfass et al. (IJSC, 2018) | Strategic communication | Military/governmental context: - Pashentsev: The state's projection of certain strategic values, interests and goals into the conscience of domestic or foreign audiences by means of adequate synchronization of multifaceted activities in all the domains of social life with professional communication support. - NATO definition | **NO** (by citing NATO's concept they implicitly show that they treat terms as synonymous) |

**Conclusion**     Before we attempt any conclusion based on the information gathered, it is important to note that, in addition to the differing convictions of subject-matter experts, there are two factors that in our case additionally impede a clear terminology decision.

The first is the fact that a thorough terminological effort requires the cooperation of both linguists and subject-matter experts, since, due to the close similarity of the concepts, the details decide the difference. Nevertheless, we will attempt our (again, purely linguistic) conclusion based on the assumption that each definition in the table is indeed *the formal description of a concept that provides the minimum amount of information that allows one to recognize and differentiate that concept from another* as NATO STANDARD AAP-77, requires.

The second factor hampering a clear conclusion is the fact that the two terms (or symbols) in question are very similar in form and really differ only by one letter. It is thus so much harder to clearly decide whether the use of a singular or plural form in a certain context can reliably be attributed to a certain concept and the possible differentiation is purposeful, or whether possible differences in form are accidental.

Nevertheless, since NATO's concept serves as our starting point, we have tried to find a pattern in the resources using the plural form *strategic communications*. A look at the definitions of the first five analyzed sources (NATO, Chatham House, RAND, King's College, and the White House) shows that they all incorporate certain elements which the other four examples do not. They refer to *strategic communications* either as a set of activities, capabilities, or programmes, and all incorporate disciplines such as public diplomacy, military information operations, psychological operations, and public affairs (at King's College, as a civilian institution, also the economy and culture). The use of the plural form could hence be attributed to this feature, since four of these five resources use the plural form of the term. The only exception is the White House "National Framework for Strategic Communication", which adopts a similar concept to the other four, but opts for a singular version of the term. Nevertheless, its authors are obviously aware of the terminology dilemma, which they, however, do not resolve, but rather use the combined form *strategic communication(s)* when providing a definition. Based on their decision to use the combined form, we can assume that they do entertain the possibility of allowing the use of the plural form *strategic communications* to designate a similar concept, as in the four other resources. Consequently, a linguistic conclusion can be drawn that the plural form of the term *strategic communications* might indeed designate a more elaborated concept than the one designated by the singular form of the term in the analyzed resources.

Regardless of the conclusion, which will in the end have to be drawn by subject-matter experts, the buzzwords that can, most importantly, mitigate possible misunderstandings and ambiguities are *terminology clarification* and *consistency*. Consistency, coupled with a clear definition of the concepts that different authors assign to one or the other of the terms in different contexts, can greatly contribute

to general understanding and can clear doubts about the actual differences between them. As mentioned above, NATO's report regarding the choice of terminology in the case of *strategic communications* can be expected later in the spring of 2019. Nevertheless, NATO can already be commended on its awareness of the terminology challenge and consistency in the use of terminology in its documents, and could be considered as a role model. In addition to facilitating clear mutual understanding and interoperability within the Alliance, which is based on definitions, its consistency can also be of great assistance to NATO member states, should they decide to adopt separate terminology to specifically denote the NATO concept.

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