

The use of Trench Talk in World War One Propaganda: A Case Study

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World War One (WWI) and its unique kind of trench warfare provided a context in which soldiers from different social and geographical origins socialised and communicated in a static yet dangerous daily routine on the frontline (see Walker, 2017). Because of this condition, the military slang that circulated among British soldiers – mostly from the 19th century – had a dramatic development during the conflict, to the point that a real ‘trench slang’, or ‘trench talk’, originated (see Coleman, 2009; Doyle and Walker, 2012; Winkowski, 2017). Both technical and informal, coarse and humorous, trench talk was soldiers’ natural linguistic response to the very experience of trench warfare (Coleman, 2009: 220). This slang became well known to civilians in the UK, primarily thanks to media propaganda and its campaign to foster a supporting spirit towards men fighting at the front. Moreover, being it mainly a lexical phenomenon, it was arguably easy to borrow its terms to give a sense of ‘soldierness’ to official propaganda material. In this respect, the dawning film industry did its part in the war effort by producing films and documentaries. Among these, *The Battle of the Somme* (1916) is an ideal case study to exemplify the use of trench talk for propagandistic purposes. Reeves states that this film is “not only the most successful propaganda film of the War, but arguably the most successful British film of all time” (1999). Although this silent film has a clear propagandistic intent, it was presented at the time as a genuine depiction of the British Army during the preparation and the beginning of the battle; its descriptive use of intertitles reflects this documentary nature. Nonetheless, borrowings from trench talk appear frequently in the descriptions, arguably to ‘catch the eye’ of the sympathising audience.

This work aims at detecting trench talk terms adopted in the intertitles, by using existing studies and vocabularies focusing on trench talk and pinpointing their meaning and role in the description. In doing so, this work seeks to show how big a role trench talk played in war propaganda, and concurrently its pivotal function in the early representation of WWI soldiers on screen.

Bibliography

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Filmography

The Battle of the Somme (United Kingdom, 1916), directed by Geoffrey Malins, distributed by the British Topical Committee for War Films.