



Euphemisms and Other Languages

Cenel-Augusto Perez

Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași

No. 11 Carol I Boulevard, 700506, Iași

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5602-6449>

Abstract: This article explores the pervasive role of euphemisms across various domains, focusing on their use in legal, medical, and everyday language. Euphemisms serve as linguistic tools to soften harsh realities, convey politeness, and navigate sensitive topics. In legal contexts, euphemisms often mask complexities or ambiguities, while in medical settings, they are employed to depersonalize or obscure uncomfortable truths. The study also examines "hot language" as a means to exaggerate mundane experiences and analyses the everyday necessity of euphemisms to navigate social interactions. By highlighting the historical evolution and modern applications of euphemisms, the article underscores their adaptability and cultural significance.

Keywords: euphemisms; legal system; law; hospital; patient; hot language; superlatives.

How to cite: Perez, Cenel-Augusto. "Methods of Conducting a Grammar Lesson for Young Learners." *LiBRI. Linguistic and Literary Broad Research and Innovation*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.70594/libri/9.1/5>



1. Introduction

Language reflects the values, fears, and social dynamics of a society, with euphemisms playing a pivotal role in softening harsh realities or masking unpleasant truths. Derived from the Greek *euphemismos* (to speak well), euphemisms function as a linguistic strategy to maintain decorum, convey politeness, or obscure sensitive subjects. Their prevalence spans diverse contexts, from legal jargon and medical terminology to everyday communication, where they shape societal norms and expectations.

This article investigates the multifaceted applications of euphemisms, exploring their usage in legal and medical fields, their role in creating "hot language" to dramatize ordinary experiences, and their everyday influence on social interactions. By examining historical and contemporary examples, the article highlights how euphemisms adapt to cultural changes and serve as both a reflection of and a tool for societal navigation.

2. Euphemisms and the language of the law

It is still aiming too low to be satisfied with language that is only “capable of being understood”, the standard definition of intelligible. Likewise, intelligibility is not dependent upon precision, which sometimes must be sacrificed for quick understanding, as in the traffic signs that tell pedestrians to *WAIT* (without saying for how long) and to *WALK* (without adding, “if you want to.”). The sacrifice of precision for intelligibility needs mentioned, not to encourage sloppiness but appropriateness, and to offset the single-minded teaching that reverses the rites. There are still times when magic words make a legal difference, e.g., *consideration for the lease* (instead of *prepaid rent*), or *the weaker magic of liquidated damages* (instead of *forfeiture* or *penalty*). Even so, there is little legal prose of any sort which cannot be made more intelligible than it usually is.

Any legal prose can be made more intelligible if the draftsman is striving for intelligibility, but even the careful draftsman sometimes finds more pressing concerns-some legitimate. There is, for example, the deliberate use of language that everyone recognizes as being easily misunderstood, accepted for the sake of quick agreement, like a sort of calculated ambiguity.

This planned confusion takes two major forms:

- saying-nothing and making it look like something, and
- saying-something and making it look like nothing, or like something else.

The law has no monopoly on either form, but as wholesale dealers in words, lawyers found the patterns too useful.

At its mildest, non-professional saying-nothing takes the form of small talk, the polite lying that is the mark of civilized society. Thus,

we say
I find it stimulating
Most interesting
Very stately
We must get together soon
Related to this is the lawyer's
"progress" letter:
Your matter is being given due
consideration in the light of the
pertinent statutes and case law,
and you be further advised in due
course.

instead of
Absolute nonsense
What a bore
Real ugly
Thank God, you're leaving

instead of
Now it looks like you're stuck.
But don't go shopping for
another lawyer.

All in all, the most interesting thing about the language of the law in connection to euphemism is the use of the latter in order to deceive. One step deeper into bad morals is saying-something calculated to mislead. This is a sort of unintelligibility related to the practice of using fine print to make contracts illegible. The object of each is the same - to force law on the victim without arousing suspicion that it is there. Various paths lead to the same sinkhole. (Mellinkoff, 2004:90)

One of them is using words so ordinary in appearance that the reader thinks he understands. Here is a sample. Without counsel, the citizen in the hurried sanctuary of the voting booth ponders "Yes" or "No" on a:

Ballot
ASSESSMENT OF GOLF COURSES.
Assembly Constitutional Amendment
No. 29. Establishes manner in which
non-profit golf-courses should be
assessed for purposes of taxation.

Meaning
Private golf courses shall be taxed
less than other private property.

These ballot words are carefully designed to produce a "Yes" vote (which they did). First, they speak of the "manner" of doing something-"assessment," "establishes," "assessed," and "taxation." So attention is diverted from the fact that the words are consistent with a way of not doing something – not assessing, not taxing. Second, they speak of non-profit, which (if it means anything to the voter) has a vaguely charitable sound, unconnected with expensive memberships. Yet in the statute books, the words will mean what they mean to lawyers – "... not designed

primarily to pay dividends...“ If the ballot measure had said what it meant, the issue would have been clear and the vote would have been in doubt.

3. Linguistic Operations without Euphemistic Anaesthetic. The Lack of Euphemisms in the Language of the Hospital and Its Effects on the Patient

From an anthropologist's point of view a hospital is a relatively isolated subculture. Doctors and nurses often live on the grounds; they go from place to place via underground tunnels; they eat, sleep and dance within the hospital; get their clothes washed at the hospital laundry; buy presents at the hospital gift shop; and often do not leave the hospital grounds for days at a time. (Baziak, 1960:261)

Within the hospital “culture” roles are strictly defined. The doctor is the dominant figure. He diagnoses symptoms and prescribes for his forty-odd patients. In hospitals, these prescriptions are called “orders” and are entered in an “order book.” The nurse is to carry out the doctor's orders. She is not even supposed to give a patient a hot water bottle without a written “order.” A doctor or a nurse ends up referring to himself or herself as “we,” which seems to be shorthand for “we, the Hospital.” Last, the patient is to “cooperate”- another frequently used hospital term-to make it possible for doctors and nurses to function with a minimum of disturbance. The patient does not call himself “we.” Requests made by the patient to the doctors and nurses are often called “complaints.”

Instead of paying attention to the patient's idiosyncratic problems, which may stem from the new environment, the unfamiliar disease, and the patient's past, doctors and nurses tend to perceive only certain features of the patient's condition, features which to an outsider may seem less significant than the ones which are ignored. These situations are the result of cultural and linguistic preconditioning.

Doctors are frequently taught to think in terms of symptoms to be diagnosed. For many doctors, then, the patient is a symptom-vehicle, and such doctors perceive and respond to symptoms instead of patients.

For example, after an examination, a doctor calls to a passing medical student, “Come on here, there's a finger you can do.” The doctor begins to describe the symptoms in a voice inaudible to the patient, whom they both ignore.

“Hmm,” says the student, with enthusiasm. “Where do you open it?”

The doctor answers, again inaudibly, and concludes “You get him all cleaned up. The only thing you need is a number eleven blade.”

Then he goes away.

In this example the neglect of the patient as a human being is striking. Although both the doctor and the medical student make comments that probably upset the patient, neither speaks to him. This neglect is made even more striking by the doctor's reference to the *patient* as a *finger*.

Traditionally, the nurse is trained to be the doctor's "handmaiden." Furthermore, she tends to respond to the doctor's *orders* (which are actually *prescriptions*) as if they were commands; indeed, the doctor often expects her to respond this way. Thus the patient may become an object upon which *orders* are to be carried out. This depersonalization of the patient may be carried so far that he is called by room number or symptom. This linguistic habit, in turn, increases the anonymity of the patient.

This is why the language used in hospitals is very important and that's why we could use some euphemisms in our linguistic acts, like in the case of certain diseases, which have been replaced by euphemistic terms, e.g., *black pox*, *blood-poison*, *blood-disease*, *dry pox*, *French ache/disease/fever/measles/pox/tickler*, *incurable bone-ache* for *syphilis*, or *one gets the crabs*. Other terms used when contracting venereal diseases are: *be gone after the girls*, *be hot*, *be ill*, *catch a cold*, *catch the boat up*, and *come home to Clapham*. Among the noun phrases used as euphemisms for these types of diseases, there are: *diseases of love*, *contagious and disgraceful diseases*. At the opposite pole stands *be free from infection*.

Sometimes, to avoid unpleasant situations, there was even invented an acronym *PWAs* which stands for *people with AIDS*. And to use an elegant term for *AIDS*, we might say *American disease*. Other elegant terms among euphemisms are also:

<i>French blue</i>	<i>an illegal narcotic</i>
<i>French Letter</i>	<i>a contraceptive sheath worn by a man</i>
<i>Irish fever</i>	<i>typhus</i>
<i>Irish toothache</i>	<i>a pregnancy</i>
<i>Spanish gout</i>	<i>syphilis</i>
<i>Spanish tummy</i>	<i>diarrhoea</i>

Place names can play the same role, e.g. *Adriatic tummy*, *Dehly belly*, *Basra belly*, *Bechuana tummy* used for *diarrhoea*.

Less harmful, but frequently more comical are the elegant terms:

<i>acorn academy</i>	<i>institution for lunatics</i>
<i>brain disorder</i>	<i>brain disease</i>
<i>cancer victim</i>	<i>killed by cancer</i>
<i>funny house</i>	<i>institution for lunatics</i>

Sometimes we can use medical terms in order to render a euphemism that denotes the substitution of an unpleasant situation, like in the case of having a medical urgency that means "the need to use the toilet".

All these terms used for various unpleasant institutions, circumstances, or showing defectiveness betray the desire to rise in the public esteem.

4. Euphemisms. Hot Language and Cool Lives

A lot of people are leading rather lukewarm lives, if not cool (and not in the sense of “good” as some use the term) or tepid lives, yet they describe themselves and their actions in terms of what might be called “hot” language.

Arthur Berger gives us an example when he once overheard two bored youths at a tennis court. Said one of them, “Let’s split,” a phrase in usage these days, in fitting with the schizophrenic nature of the times. Somehow “splitting” from a place is much more exciting than “going someplace else” or “leaving”. (Berger, 1971:81)

Is it possible that there is a direct correlation between a growing sense of powerlessness and futility in our lives and the jazz-up language we use? The more you feel yourself diminished the more you “build yourself up” by using hot language, showing that you are in some kind of an “in” group, and know what’s going on. It is only natural to try to represent oneself in the best possible light, but if we study the way people do this, we find that this hot or inflated language is somewhat self-defeating.

As everything becomes inflated and tremendous, the world loses its currency. What is normal becomes tremendous. What then do we say about something that really is tremendous? It seems that the more we use hot language to add color to our otherwise colorless lives, the less utility the hot language has; it becomes devalued, and we have to work harder for less, to speak. What used to be *large* is now *giant king size*, and we have reached the point of no return.

Perhaps there is some kind of search for the infinite at work. In some advertisements from a humane society, various kinds of memberships were announced: *Annual \$5, Patron \$10, Life \$100, Perpetual \$250*. A lifetime is no longer enough. We must have a rate for those who would be immortal. On the opposite side of the fence death must be made more final, somehow. Thus we may find ads for insecticides claiming that they *kill bugs dead!*

The use of this hot language is symptomatic of a certain malaise affecting people, which leads them to believe that life must at all times be exciting, vital, dazzling, full of “fabulous” experiences. Thus it makes us devalue our lives since we take a rather absurd conception of what is normal, measure our lives against this false norm, and find ourselves wanting.

A distinguished sociologist, Leo Lowenthal, has discussed a form of hot language, the use of “superlatives,” in the following manner:

“Everything is presented as something unique, unheard of, and outstanding. Thus nothing is unique, unheard of, and outstanding. The totality of the superlative means the totality of the mediocre. It levels the presentation of human life to the presentation of merchandise”. (Lowenthal, 1984:80)

If we consider this hot language as another way of using euphemisms, we can see in what was mentioned above another negative effect of this linguistic device. So, how does the ordinary man feel in the seventies, in an era when being a “star” is no longer significant since we now have “superstars?”

5. Euphemisms in Everyday Life

Even unaware we get connected with euphemisms every day. Even if we choose to stay in or go out to see a movie or take a walk, we run into euphemisms without being, sometimes even, aware of them.

We all have heard about those second-hand stores or ready-made things, but if we go to the automobile dealers, who are ardent euphemists, we might hear from them reconditioned, rebuilt, repossessed and used cars instead of second-hand cars and for ready-made, department stores offer ready-tailored, ready-to-wear and ready-to-put-on clothes.

In New York a *second-hand store* is now often called a *buy-and-sell shop*; in Chicago, it may also be a *resale store* or a *resale shop*. There is also a continuous flow of euphemisms for *damaged* or *shop-worn*, e. g. *second*, *slightly second*, *slightly hurt*, *store-used* and *substandard*.

Sometimes the use of euphemisms is connected to the changes that occur in our lives. The appearance of horse meat for human consumption in 1943 started a search for euphemisms to designate it. One may submit a list of names for dishes designated to *tempt the most ticklish palates*, including *braised fetlocks* and *fillet of Pegasus*, but sometimes, in revolution against euphemism, a bold advertiser tells the truth. Thus, an advertisement of a Carmel restaurant may announce *pseudo mint juleps*, and another department store may advertise *fake pearls*.

The uplifters are naturally heavy users of ameliorative and disarming words. One of the most recent coinage is door-key children, a humane designation for the youngsters who are turned loose on city streets to shift for themselves. In *lunatic asylums* (now referred to as *state hospitals*, *mental hospitals*, or *psychiatric institutes*) a *guard* is called an *attendant*, a *violent patient* is described as an *assaultive*, and one whose aberration is not all-out is considered *maladjusted*.

In *federal prison* (better yet, *assembly centers*) a *guard* is a *custodial officer*; among social workers, *casework* has become *personal service* (while a person who doesn't have a job may be called *at liberty*), and every surviving *orphan asylum* has become an *infant home* or something equally mellifluous. In many American cities, what used to be the office of the overseers of the poor is now the community welfare department. The English, in this field of gilding the unpleasant facts of life, yield nothing to the Americans. Their reform schools for wayward boys, which have been *Borstal institutions* since 1902, are now called *approved schools*.

We are surrounded by euphemisms. We need them in our lives. It is like a game of language that we play almost every day. Let's take, for example, this movie scene from *American Wedding* (2003, USA), when a friend tells the groom that he should reckon with his future wife in order to plan the perfect wedding for her. The groom's reaction is : "You mean like spying?" and his friend's response is: "No. Spying means deception. Extra-attention...means that you are concerned."

We see here how cleverly they choose the words for some actions that, at first sight, might seem deceitful, but, in the end, and in the name of love, would be forgiven anyway.

Substitutes for *death* and *to die*, both euphemistic and facetious, have been numerous in America since its earliest days. Many of the latter class are heritage from England, e. g., *to croak*, *to kick the bucket*, and *to peg out*; but others are of American origin, e. g., *to pass in one's checks*, *to go under*, and the short form *to kick*. *To go West* may be American also, though it was used by British soldiers in World War I. The same can be said with more certainty of *to blow off*, *to bite the dust*, *to fold*, *to hop off*, *to lose the decision*, *to pass out*, *to poop out*, *to shuffle off* and *to shoot the works*. Similarly, for *death*, there is *the one-way ticket*, *the fade-out*, *the last call*, and *the payoff*, and for *dead*, *checked out*, *finished*, *gone under*, and *washed up*. In the days of Prohibition, the racketeers invented (or had invented for them by newspaper reporters) a number of picturesque terms for *to kill*, e. g., *to take for a ride*, *to put on the spot*, *to put the finger on*, and *to rub out*, and at other times ordinary criminals have launched synonyms for *to be executed*, e. g., *to fry*, *to take a hot squat*, and *to be gassed* (lethal gas). There are also many more decorous terms in the field of mortality: *breathed his last*, *called home*, *laid to rest*, *long home*, *the Grim Reaper*, and *the Pale horseman*.

Sometimes there was an era in which the most innocuous words became unacceptable at a rate that must have been dizzying. The conventional terms for the parts of a chicken, such as *breast*, *legs*, and *thigh*, caused particular anxiety and had to be replaced with terms like *drumstick*, *first joint*, and *white meat*. The names for the male animals, such as *buck* and *stallion*, were never used in mixed company. *Bulls* were called *sires*, *male animals*, and, in a truly inspired burst of ridiculousness, *gentleman cows*. But it didn't stop there. Euphemisms had to be devised for any word that contained *cock* in it – *haycock* became *haystack*, *cockerel* became *rooster* – and for the better part of a century, people with *cock* in their names, such as *Hitchcock* or *Peacock*, suffered unspeakable embarrassment when they were required to make introduction.

6. Conclusion

Euphemisms are an integral part of human communication, reflecting social values, sensitivities, and the need for tactful expression. In legal and medical contexts, they navigate the tension between precision and intelligibility, while in everyday life, they enable individuals to address uncomfortable realities with subtlety. The phenomenon of "hot language" further illustrates the creative use of euphemisms to embellish mundane experiences and create a sense of excitement or inclusion.

Despite their utility, euphemisms can also obscure the truth and perpetuate misunderstandings, as seen in legal ambiguities and depersonalized medical interactions. Nevertheless, their adaptability underscores their importance in cultural discourse. By examining the historical and contemporary use of euphemisms, this article sheds light on their enduring relevance and the intricate interplay between language, culture, and society.

7. References

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