



Euphemisms: Tell Me What You Do and I'll Tell You What You Are!

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Abstract: Occupational euphemisms, characterized by the transformation of traditional job titles into more dignified or elaborate terms, reveal much about societal attitudes toward labor, prestige, and self-perception. This article explores the evolution and proliferation of occupational euphemisms in the United States and England, focusing on their origins, usage, and cultural implications. From the emergence of terms like *realtor* and *mortician* in the United States to the transformation of *garbagemen* into *sanitary officers* and *cobblers* into *practipedists*, occupational euphemisms serve as a means of rebranding professions to elevate status or align with societal expectations. The analysis extends to linguistic creativity in coining terms such as *beautician*, *linguistician*, and even *hot-dog-engineer*. This article highlights the cultural differences in the adoption of euphemisms and their role in shaping perceptions of occupations, shedding light on broader themes of identity, aspiration, and linguistic ingenuity.

Keywords: occupational euphemisms; euphemistic language; professional titles; cultural euphemisms; workplace terminology; semantic manipulation.

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1. Introduction

Occupational titles have long served as markers of societal status, professional identity, and cultural values. In the United States, in particular, the inclination to elevate or rebrand professions through euphemistic terminology reflects a broader cultural phenomenon driven by aspirations for prestige and recognition. Terms such as *realtor*, *mortician*, and *beautician* exemplify a linguistic effort to dignify roles that might otherwise be perceived as mundane or lowly. This phenomenon extends beyond semantics, influencing how professions are viewed by society and the individuals within them.

This article delves into the historical and cultural contexts that gave rise to occupational euphemisms, analysing their linguistic structures, societal motivations, and cross-cultural differences. While Americans often embrace such terms as a way to enhance their professional image, the English have historically adopted a more restrained approach. Through an examination of specific examples, such as the rebranding of *dustmen* into *cleansing personnel* in England and *dog catchers* into *canine control officers* in the United States, this article underscores the role of euphemisms in shaping occupational identities.

2. Occupational Euphemisms

The American, perhaps more than any other individual, is prone to feel apologetic about the trade he follows. He seldom believes that it is entirely worthy of his virtues and talents; almost always, he imagines that he would have excelled in something more prestigious. Unfortunately, it is not always possible for him to escape his current profession, or even to plausibly dream of doing so. As a form of consolation, he often reassures himself by believing he belongs to a superior section of his craft, and frequently, he invents a more sophisticated title to distinguish himself from the rest. Here lies the origin of a multitude of characteristic American euphemisms, e.g., *mortician* for *undertaker*; *realtor* for *real-estate agent*, *electragist* for *electrical contractor*; *aisle manager* for *floor-walker*; *beautician* for *hairdresser*; *exterminating engineer* for *rat-catcher*, and so on. (Mencken, 1945:33)

The term *realtor* was devised by Charles N. Chadbourn, a prominent real-estate agent of Minneapolis, who sought a distinctive title for himself and his colleagues on the Minneapolis Real Estate Board to set them apart from less reputable dealers in houses and lots. The members were so pleased with the new term that Chadbourn presented it at the convention of the National Association of Real Estate Boards in New Orleans, where it was accepted gratefully. (Chadbourn, 1965:56)

A suggestion that *realtor* derives from two Spanish words, *real* (meaning *royal*) and *toro* (meaning *bull*) implying *royal bull*, is firmly rejected by those who

use the term. The official pronunciation is not *realtor*, but *reel-tor*. The agent suffix *-or* has traditionally carried a more dignified connotation in English compared to the allied *-er*; perhaps because it often represents the Latin *-ator* or the French *-eur*. For instance, *professor* is perceived as superior to *teacher*, not only in meaning but also in its connotation and atmosphere. Similarly, *author* is regarded as more prestigious than *writer*. In the democratic ethos of the United States, where aspirations are celebrated, the term *realtor* has inspired the creation of similar titles, such as *insuror* (an insurance agent), *furnitor* (a furniture dealer), and *publicator* (a press agent). The radio industry, in particular, has a long list of terms ending in *-or*, but these are generally applied to mechanical devices rather than individuals, - e.g., *resistor*, *inductor*, *capacitator* and *arrestor*, the latter being a refined replacement for the older term *lightning arrester*. (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989: 243)

The term *electragist*, like *realtor*, appears to be the monopoly by elite technicians who adopted it with pride: "it is copyrighted by the Association of Electragists International, whose members alone may use it." In contrast, *mortician* remains in the public domain. Derived by analogy to *physician*, this title reflects the admiration many undertakers hold for medical professionals. Historically, some undertakers even referred to themselves as *embalming surgeons*. The evolution of this terminology has led to an entirely lexicon within the field. A *mortician* never handles a *corpse*; he *prepares* a *body* or a *patient*. Their work takes place in a *preparation-room* or *operating-room*, and once complete, the *patient* is placed in a *casket* and stored in a *reposing-room* or *slumber-room* of a *funeral-home*. On the day of the funeral, the patient is moved to the *chapel* for the final rites and then transported to the cemetery in a *funeral-car* or *casket-coach*. Traditional terms like *shroud* have been replaced by euphemisms such as *négligé* or *slumber-shirt* or *slumber-robe*. Similarly, a *mortician's* work truck is an *ambulance*, and the *cemeteries* are increasingly referred to as a *memorial-park*. In the West, *cemeteries* are often supplanted by *public mausoleums*, which are sometimes branded as *cloisters* or *burial-abbeys*.

The widespread success of *mortician* paved the way for a proliferation of similar terms ending in *-ician*, e.g., *beautician*, *cosmetician*, *radiotrician*, *linguistician*. For example, *beautician* reached England by 1937, although it was co-opted by beauty-preparation manufacturers, who also tried to lay hands on *cosmetician*. These companies also attempted to appropriate *cosmetician*, which later gave way to *cosmetologist*. The National Hairdressers and *Cosmeteologists* Association in the United States adopted this latter term to align with evolving industry standards. By contrast, in the 19th century, establishments run by female hairdressers were simply called *hairdressing parlors*. Over time, these became *beauty parlor*, which were later rebranded as *beauty shop*, *beauty shoppe* and *beauty salon*.

Similarly, *radiotrician*, perhaps inspired by *electrician* rather than *mortician*, was adopted by the radio technicians in the late 1920s, shortly after electricians began referring to themselves as *electragists*; both terms now have little currency among the laity. In parallel, the term *shoetrician* is likewise uncommon; however, the earlier euphemism *shoe rebuilder* flourishes, and some brethren of the craft are still content to be *cobblers*. The term *linguistician* was proposed to distinguish the scientific students of language from polyglots, as the term *linguist* often denotes to the general public someone skilled in multiple languages rather than a scholar of linguistics. However, the resemblance of *linguistician* to *mortician* has repelled the sensitive-eared members of the profession. American speech has also birthed whimsical terms such as *whooptician*, *fermetician*, *bootblackitician*, *scholastician* and *ecstastician* (the latter referring to “one who studies, or is versed in, ecstasies”).

The tendency to elevate low-status profession with seemingly dignified titles dates back to the American Revolution and has been frequently noted by English travelers. They noted that even the smallest American shopkeepers referred to their establishments *stores*, a term that to an Englishman suggested a larger, more prestigious business. Unlike in England, where the distinct branches of commerce such as *hosiers*, *haberdashers*, *clothiers*, *linen drapers*, *grocers*, *stationers* were clearly defined, in America these roles were often subsumed under the broad designation of *merchant* or *storekeeper*. By 1846 the American *barbershop* had begun to be a *shaving salon*, and by 1850 a *photographer* was a *daguerrian artist*. By 1875 *barbers* had rebranded themselves as *tonsorial artists* or *tonsorialists*, and by the early 1880s, respectable *saloonkeepers* were adopting titles such as *restauranters* or *restauranteurs*. Early American *photographers* referred to their workplace as *studios*, a term that was later adopted by the operators of billiard rooms, barbershops and even certain types of stores. A 1926 contributor to *American Speech* reported encountering terms such as *tonsorial studio*, *food studio* and *shoe studio*. By 1940 the makers of Fanny Farmer candies described their kitchens as *studios*, a trend mirrored by a Canadian competitor.

The list of such euphemisms might be lengthened almost endlessly. A *bill collector* has described himself as a *collection correspondent*, a *tape-worm specialist* has operated a *Helminthological Institute*. In some stores, the title *section manager* (previously *aisle manager*) has replaced the term *floor walker*. The term *newsboy* has evolved into *newspaper boy*, likely in an effort to imbue the role with greater dignity; in Peoria a *dog catcher* is a *canine control officer*, and a *humane officer* in Tulsa, Oklahoma; in Denver, an *iceman* is an *ice attendant*; a *grocer* is a *provisioner* or a *victualer*. *Housewives* should become *homemakers*. In 1942 reformers in Kansas City launched a campaign to replace *homemakers* to *household*

executive. The drive for rebranding extended even to the spiritualists. In 1943, more affluent practitioners, eager to escape the term's negative connotations, resolved to call themselves *psychists* gardeners have reimagined themselves as *landscape architects*, *encyclopaedia* salesmen as *educational advisors* and *messenger boys* as *communication carriers*. The humble *garbageman* or *ashman* (known in England as the: *dustman*) has largely disappeared, replaced by *sanitary officer*, while the department overseeing their work has been renamed the *table waste disposal department*. The *junkmen*, by their own resolve, are now *waste material dealers*.

Most americas *press-agents* now call themselves *public relations counsels*, *contact-managers* or *publicists*, all *tree-trimmers* are *tree-surgeons*, all *milk-wagon* and *bakery-wagon drivers* have become *salesmen*, and nearly all *janitors* are *superintendents*. The American fondness for such sonorous appellations arrested the interest of W. L. George, the English novelist, when he visited the United States in 1920. remarked:

“Business titles are given in America more readily than in England. I know one *president* whose staff consists of two typists. Many firms have four *vice-presidents*. In the magazines you seldom find merely an *editor*; the others need their share of honor, so they are *associate* (not assistant) *editors*. A dentist is called a *doctor*. I wandered into university, knowing nobody, and casually asked for the *dean*. I was asked, “Which *dean*?” In that building there were enough deans to stick all the English cathedrals. The master of a secret society is *royal supreme knight commander*. Perhaps I reached the extreme at a theatre in Boston, when I wanted something, I forgot what, and was told that I must apply to the *chief of the ushers*. He was a mild little man, who had something to do with people getting into their seats, rather a comedown from the pomp and circumstance of his title. Growing interested, I examined my programme, with the following result: It is not a large theatre, but it has a *press-representative*, a *treasurer* (box-office clerk), an *assistant treasurer* (box-office junior clerk), an *advertising-agent*, our old friend the *chief of the ushers*, a *stage-manager*, a *head-electrician*, a *master of properties* (in England called *props*), a *leader of the orchestra* (pity this-why not *president*?), and a *matron* (unknown)”. (George, 1920:123)

For several years the *Engineering New-Record*, the organ of the legitimate engineers, devoted a weekly column to such encroachments in their field. Some of the species were so fantastic that the magazine reproduced business cards photographically to assure readers it was no joking. Among the most striking cases was a bedding manufacturer who first became a *mattress-engineer* and later promoted himself to the lofty dignity of *sleep-engineer*. In an Atlanta department-store, the *News-Record* found an *engineer of good taste* – a young woman employed to advise newly-married couple shopping for the furniture

department. Elsewhere, it uncovered *display-engineers*, formerly known as *window-dressers* until some visionary among them made the great leap, *demolition-engineers* who were once content to be *house-wreckers*. Others examples included: the *commencement-engineer* arranges college and high-school commencements; the *packing-engineer*, a specialist in creating goods for shipment; the *correspondence-engineers* writes selling letters guaranteed to pull; the *income-engineer* is an insurance solicitor in a new false-face; the *dwelling-engineer* replaces lost keys, repairs leaky roofs, and plugs up rat-horse in the cellar; the *vision-engineer* supplies spectacles at cut rates; the *dehorning-engineer* attends to bulls who grow too frisky.

And the list may continue:

box-engineer (the *packing-engineer* under another name)

financial-engineer (a stock-market tipster)

wrapping-engineer (a dealer in wrapping-paper)

matrimonial-engineer (a psychoanalyst specializing in advice to the lovelorn)

socioreligious-engineer (an uplifter)

social-engineer (also an uplifter)

psychological-engineer (another kind of psychoanalyst)

package-engineer (the *packing-engineer* again)

criminal-engineer (a criminologist)

podiatric-engineer (a corn-doctor)

film-engineer (or *film-gineer*)

golf-engineer (a designer of golf courses)

human-engineer (another variety of psychoanalyst)

automotive-painting-engineer (someone who paints cars)

painting-engineer (someone who paints)

clothing-engineer (someone who fixes clothes)

printing-engineer (someone who prints documents)

blasting-engineer (someone who uses drilling and blasting)

dry-cleaning-engineer (someone who cleans the clothes)

furniture-engineer (someone who deals with the furniture)

photographic-engineer (someone who takes pictures)

container-engineer (someone who puts things in containers)

furnishing-engineer (someone who designs furniture)

feed-plant-engineer (someone who takes care of the plants)

milk-engineer (someone who brings the milk)

surface-protection-engineer (someone who uses protection substances on different floors)

<i>analyzation-engineer</i>	(someone who finds the optimal solution to a problem)
<i>fiction-engineer</i>	(someone who writes fiction)
<i>casement-window-engineer</i>	(someone who repairs windows)
<i>shingle-engineer</i>	(someone who uses pebbles)
<i>fumigating-engineer</i>	(someone who clears the air)
<i>laminated-wood-engineer</i>	(someone who treats wood with different substances)
<i>horse-engineer</i>	(someone who takes care of the horses)
<i>ice-engineer</i>	(someone who produces ice)
<i>recreation-engineer</i>	(someone who is in charge with leisure activities)
<i>tire-engineer</i>	(someone who fixes tires)
<i>paint-maintenance-engineer</i>	(someone who paints)
<i>space-saving-engineer</i>	(someone who arranges and organizes stuff)
<i>diet-kitchen-engineer</i>	(nutritionist)
<i>patent-engineer</i>	(inventor)
<i>equipment-engineer</i>	(someone who is in charge with the equipment)
<i>floor-covering-engineer</i>	(someone who covers the floors)
<i>society-engineer</i>	(someone who influences the society in a certain way)
<i>window-cleaning-engineer</i>	(someone who cleans windows)
<i>dust-engineer</i>	(someone who dusts surfaces)
<i>hospitalization-engineer</i>	(someone who takes care of the infrastructure of a hospital)
<i>baking-engineer</i>	(baker)
<i>directory-engineer</i>	(someone who puts documents/files in order)
<i>advertising-engineer</i>	(someone who works for an advertising agency)
<i>amusement-engineer</i>	(clown)
<i>electric-sign-engineer</i>	(someone who repairs electrical signs)
<i>household-engineer</i>	(helps families with various housekeeping tasks)
<i>pageant-engineer</i>	(someone who organizes beauty contests)
<i>idea-engineer</i>	(someone who offers ideas)
<i>ballistics-engineer</i>	(someone who launches projectiles)
<i>lace-engineer</i>	(sewer)
<i>sign-engineer</i>	(someone who designs signs)

Perhaps the prize should go to the *dansant-engineer* (an agent supplying dancers and musicians to nightclubs), or to the *hot-dog-engineer*.

Next to *engineer*, *expert* seems to be the favourite talisman of Americans eager to augment their estate and dignity in this world. Very often it is hitched to an explanatory prefix, e.g., *housing-*, *planning-*, *hog-*, *erosion-*, *marketing-*, *boll-weevil-*, or *sheep-dip-*, but sometimes the simple adjective *trained-* suffices. (Rees, 1990:58)

Englishmen are a good deal less ashamed of their trades than Americans, which has led to a more restrained use of occupational euphemism. However, as early as the Seventeenth Century, some of the more advanced English dressers of female coiffures began adopting elevated titles for their professions. For instance, certain hairdressers specializing in women's hairstyle referred to themselves as *woman surgeons*, while some male tailors claimed to be *master fashioners*. By the end of that century, the buyers and sellers of old clothes in London pass as *wardrobe dealers*.

In more recent history, occupational rebranding in England has continued, albeit with less extravagance than in the United States. The Glasgow *dustmen* (American: *garbageman*) were renamed *cleansing personnel*, meanwhile, the *rat-catching department* of the Ministry of Food had become the *director of infestation control*, and the *rat-catcher* became a *rodent operative*. Many English *butchers* now identify themselves as *purveyors*, often embellishing their titles with phrases such as *purveyors of quality*, and those of Birmingham use *meat traders*. The *fishmongers* still vacillate between *fish specialist* and *sea-food caterer*, the latter being an American influence. A Cheshire *cobbler*, disdaining both *shoe rebuilder* and *shoetrician*, calls himself a *practipedist*.

The English euphemism-of-all-work used to be *lady*. In the Seventeenth Century, the court poet Edmund Waller referred to actresses then a novelty on the English stage, as *lady actors*. This usage has persisted, with English newspapers continuing to refer to *lady secretaries*, *lady doctors*, *lady inspectors* and *lady champions*. Even today, women's clothing is labeled as *ladies' wear* in most English shops. Excessive reliance on *lady* seems to be going out, and *women's singles* and *women's ice hockey* are seen on sports pages. In the United States *lady* is more definitely out of favour. The *salesladies* of yesteryear are now *saleswomen* or *salesgirls*, and the *female superintendent* of a hospital is simply the *superintendent*.

The English still cling to the suffix *-ess* far more frequently than Americans. Titles such as *mayoress* or *manageress* remain common in England, whereas Americans find such terms unusual. The word *conductress* (of a street car), for example, referring to a female streetcar operator, would sound peculiar in the United States. However, older forms of *-ess* remain in limited use in American English, as seen in words like: *deaconess*, *patroness*, and *poetess*. During the era of elegance straddling the Civil War the termination was considered rather swagger and some

grotesque example came into use as: *doctress*, *lecturess*, *nabobess*, *rebeless*, *traderess*, *astronomess*, *editress* and *mulatress*; the comic writers of the time contributed *championess*, *Mormoness* and *prestigitateuress*. The Oxford English Dictionary traces *sculptress*, in English use, to 1662, and *presidentess*, to 1782, and, in American use, to 1819. James Fenimore Cooper used *Americaness* in his "Home as Found" (1838), but it never caught on.

3. Conclusion

Occupational euphemisms provide a lens through which to examine societal values, cultural aspirations, and linguistic creativity. In the United States, the proliferation of such terms highlights a cultural tendency to elevate professional status through language, often blurring the lines between reality and perception. Titles such as "mortician," "realtor," and "engineer" serve not only as rebranding tools but also as indicators of the evolving relationship between identity and occupation.

In England, while occupational euphemisms are less pervasive, their presence still signifies a subtler approach to aligning professional roles with societal expectations. The global diffusion of occupational euphemisms underscores their relevance in shaping perceptions of labor and prestige.

Ultimately, the study of occupational euphemisms reveals the power of language to influence, and reflect cultural attitudes toward work. As societies continue to evolve, so too will the language of professions, offering ongoing insights into the dynamic interplay between linguistics and cultural dynamics.

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