



Euphemisms and Political Correctness

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Abstract: Euphemisms are a pervasive aspect of language, reflecting cultural sensibilities and serving as tools for expressing sensitive or controversial ideas in a palpable manner. Originating from the Greek term *euphemismos*, euphemisms involve substituting harsh or taboo expressions with more agreeable alternatives. This article explores the evolution, usage, and implications of euphemisms in modern discourse, examining their roles in various contexts such as politics, advertising, healthcare, and everyday life. While euphemisms can facilitate polite communication, their overuse can obscure reality and diminish clarity, as evidenced in historical, legal, and social frameworks. This analysis highlights the delicate balance between linguistic sensitivity and the potential for obfuscation inherent in euphemistic language.

Keywords: euphemisms; linguistic sensitivity; cultural taboos; political correctness; semantic substitution; metaphor; metonymy.

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1. Introduction

Language is an ever-evolving entity, reflecting the cultural, social, and political landscapes in which it operates. Among its many features, euphemisms stand out as a fascinating and complex linguistic phenomenon. Rooted in the Greek term *euphemismos*, meaning "to speak well" or "to use auspicious words," euphemisms are linguistic devices that replace direct or potentially offensive terms with more palatable alternatives.

Euphemisms have been a part of human communication since the advent of language. They serve as verbal tools for navigating delicate social interactions, avoiding conflict, and maintaining decorum. From the polite *powder room* to the politically charged *collateral damage*, euphemisms permeate diverse aspects of life, including politics, healthcare, advertising, and interpersonal communication. In some cases, they reflect cultural taboos or societal discomfort with certain topics, such as death, sex, or bodily functions. In others, they reveal attempts to manipulate public perception, such as the use of euphemistic phrases to downplay harsh realities in political or military contexts.

However, euphemisms are not without controversy. While they can promote civility and tact, they also carry the risk of distorting truth and obstructing clear thinking. Historical examples, such as the Nazi use of *endgültige Lösung* (*final solution*) to describe the *Holocaust*, underscore the potential for euphemisms to enable systemic atrocities by sanitizing language. Similarly, the use of euphemistic terms like *redeployment* in contemporary politics exemplifies their capacity to obscure accountability and reality.

This article examines the multifaceted nature of euphemisms, exploring their linguistic mechanisms, cultural implications, and potential consequences. By delving into their usage across various domains, it aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of their role in shaping human communication.

2. Euphemisms. General presentation

Modern American speech, while not always clear, correct, or turned with much style, is supposed to be uncommonly frank. Consider the current explosion of four-letter words and the explicit discussion of sexual topics. Housewives on television may chat about their sex lives in terms that, a decade ago, would have made gynecologists blush; yet, more often than not, these emancipated women still speak about their children's *going to the potty*. Government spokesmen talk about *redeployment* of American troops (by which they mean *withdrawal*). When sociologists refer to *blacks* living in *slums*, they are likely to mumble about *nonwhites* in a *culturally deprived environment*. The CIA may have never used the expression *to terminate with extreme prejudice* when referring to eliminating a spy.

However, in the context of a war where the *pacification of the enemy infrastructure* was the military's euphemism for *blasting the Viet Cong out of a village*, the phrase sounded so plausible that millions readily accepted it as accurate.

The image of a generation blessed with a swinging, liberated language is largely an illusion. Despite its swaggering sexual candor, much contemporary speech still hides behind that traditional enemy of plain talk: the euphemism.

Derived from the Greek word (*euphemismos*) meaning "auspicious, sounding good/to sound well/to use words of good omen/to speak well of," euphemism is the substitution of a mild or agreeable term for a blunt or offensive one.; It involves replacing expressions that might offend or suggest something unpleasant or the substitution of an agreeable word for one that is taboo, harsh, indelicate, and it is usually a less explicit and a more delicate term, in other words – telling it like it isn't, or, why not, saying it the nice way.

Euphemisms have likely existed since the beginning of language. As long as there have been topics of which men thought the less said the better, there have been better ways of addressing them. In everyday conversation the euphemism is, at worst, a necessary evil; at best, they serve as useful tools to avoid unnecessary conflict or shocking others. Language purists and the blunt-spoken may wince when a young woman at a party coyly asks for directions to *the powder room*, but to most people, such familiar euphemisms are no more harmful or annoying than, say, a split infinitive.

On a larger scale, however, the persistent growth of euphemism in a language poses a threat to clear thought and action, as their fundamental intent is often to deceive. Linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf pointed out that the structure of a given language partly determines how its speakers perceive reality. (Lee, 1964:113) For instance, if *substandard housing* makes *rotting slums* appear more livable or inevitable to some people, then their view of American cities has been distorted and their ability to assess the significance of poverty has been reduced. Perhaps the most chilling example of euphemism's destructive power occurred in Hitler's Germany. The widespread corruption of language under Nazism, as noted critic George Steiner, is epitomized by the term *endgültige Lösung (final solution)*, which "came to signify the death of 6,000,000 human beings in gas ovens." (Steiner, 1982:4)

No one could argue that American English is under siege from linguistic falsehood, but euphemisms today have the nagging persistence of a headache. Despite the increasing use of nudity and sexual innuendo in advertising, Madison Avenue is still the great exponent of talking to *the average person of good upbringing* – as one TV executive has euphemistically described *the ordinary American* – in ways that won't offend him. Although this is like fooling half the people none of the time, it has produced a handsome bouquet of roses by other

names. Thus there is *facial-quality tissue* that is not intended for use on faces, and *rinses* or *tints* for women who might be unsettled to think they dye their hair. In the world of deodorants, people never sweat or smell; they simply “offend.” *False teeth* sound truer when known as *dentures*.

Euphemisms are everywhere. That’s why I’ve decided to discuss euphemisms in different compartments of our life. Thus, we can speak about euphemisms in government and political issues; there is a wide range of occupational euphemisms, especially for Americans. Also, concerning the euphemisms, we can speak about the language of the law, the language of hospital and healthcare and the effects on the patient or even about hot language. And there are plenty of other euphemisms that if they don’t belong or can be included in one of the categories mentioned above, we will just speak of them as euphemisms in everyday life.

A significant portion of bawdy language is made up of euphemisms. In close connection with euphemisms, like bawdy words mentioned above, are taboo words, swearing, forbidden words and terms of abuse. However, all these categories will have their own chapter and will be discussed in detail later.

So, what are, in fact, these euphemisms? They are neat little rhetorical devices that allow us to cloak otherwise naked thoughts. We take a taboo word and rephrase it with sufficient taste and delicacy to make it acceptable. There are many ways to *euphemize* a word: We can render it somewhat abstract; we can create words that are longer and more complex (bigger is often considered better) we can understate, use indirection, or simply substitute a foreign word.

In the process of creating euphemisms, metaphor is as active as any other field of life. Here are a few examples of such transfers of meaning:

<i>battle of sexes</i>	<i>the permanent competition/fight between men and women</i>
<i>battle of the memories points</i>	<i>conflict between persons who write books to prove their points</i>
<i>be a bottle</i>	<i>be a homosexual</i>
<i>be an actress</i>	<i>be a prostitute</i>
<i>blue joke</i>	<i>pornographic joke</i>
<i>bodice ripper</i>	<i>pornographic novel</i>
<i>brick short of a load</i>	<i>moron</i>
<i>dead battery</i>	<i>a battery that does not work</i>
<i>dead soldier</i>	<i>an empty bottle of wine or spirits</i>
<i>green gold</i>	<i>counterfeit dollars</i>
<i>Iron Curtain countries</i>	<i>the former West European frontiers with the Eastern countries</i>

Montezuma's revenge *diarrhea*
one foot in the grave *near death*

And metonymy is combined with metaphor in:

- *abode of love, bed-house, girlie house, house of ill fame, house of sale/tolerance* for *brothel*,
- *back door, backward, bitch, husband* for a *homosexual*,
- *behind the wire, black whole, cross bar hotel, custody suite* for *prison*,
- *five fingers* “a sentence of five years” as you can count the sentence term (expressed by the metaphor *fingers*) on the five fingers of your hand,
- *private parts* for *human genitalia*.

Euphemisms, however, are not without their problems. Paradoxically, the euphemism can involve transfer of meaning from a word or phrase for its unpleasant antonym:

flowery language *swearing*
everlasting life *death*,

making them, sometimes, uninspiring, unimaginative, and escapist. At its worst, modern writing does not involve choosing words for the sake of their meaning or inventing images to clarify the meaning. Instead, it consists of stringing together long strips of words that have already been arranged by someone else and making the results presentable through sheer pretense. The appeal of this kind of writing lies in its simplicity. Once the habit is formed, it is easier, and even quicker, to say *In my opinion it is not an unjustifiable assumption that* rather than simply *I think*. If you use ready-made phrases, you not only avoid searching for the right words, but you also sidestep concerns about the rhythms of your sentences, as these phrases are typically constructed to sound more or less euphonious.

3. Euphemisms and Political Correctness

The term “politically correct” may lead people to think it has to do with Politics, with a capital P, in reality, it pertains more to do with social concerns. So, why not “socially correct,” then? - asks Nigel Rees in his *The Politically Correct Phrasebook* – because that would make it sound it was about manners and etiquette. On the other hand, “ideologically correct” would reveal its true nature, which ultimately ties it back to politics. Rees describes politically correct phrases as “euphemisms with *attitude*” (in the current sense of the word), because they are not only softer, less offensive ways of expressing things; they also make statements that go beyond their literal meanings. However, in attempting to avoid offending, whether racist, sexist, or otherwise, to certain minorities, they often come across as calculated and compromised. (Rees, 1990:34)

In our time, political speech and writing largely function as a defense of the indefensible. Actions such as the continuation of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, or the dropping of the atom bombs of Japan can indeed be defended, but only through arguments that are too brutal for most people to confront, and which contradict the stated aims of political parties. As a result, political language often relies on euphemism, question-begging, and sheer cloudy vagueness (Orwell, 1946:3). For instance, defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, their cattle machine-gunned, and their huts ablaze with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent along the roads with no what they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, shot in the back of the neck, or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic labour camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*. Such euphemistic phraseology is essential if one wants to name actions without conjuring mental pictures of them. Consider for instance, an English professor defending Russian totalitarianism. He cannot directly state, “I believe in killing off your opponents when you can get good results by doing so”.

Instead, he will say something like this:

“While freely conceding that the Soviet regime exhibits certain features which the humanitarian may be inclined to deplore, we must, I think, agree that a certain curtailment of the right to political oppositions is an unavoidable concomitant of transitional periods and that the rigors which the Russian people have been called upon to undergo have been amply justified in the sphere of concrete achievement”.

This inflated style is itself a form of euphemism. As civilizations decline, they become increasingly concerned with form over substance, particularly in language. During World War I we called it *shell shock*-a straightforward, two-syllable term that was clear and descriptive. A generation later, after the Second World War had come and gone, we called it combat fatigue. It meant the same thing, and there were still just two words-but the two syllables had grown to four. Today the two words have doubled, and the original pair of syllables has mushroomed to eight. It even has an acronym, PTSD-post traumatic stress disorder. Although it describes the same condition and the pain it entails, it aligns more closely with modern sensibilities.

Evolution exemplifies the pretentious euphemisms that characterize much of our modern discourse. Euphemisms and the politically correct language can sometimes be merely prissy, absurd or tiresome. However, at their worst, they obscure clear thinking and harm the very people and causes they claim to support.

For instance, the blind have struggled with euphemisms for as long as anybody can remember, and late twentieth-century America was no exception.

While politically correct language aimed to modernize and enlighten perspective, it often reinforced notions of inferiority and second-class status. These euphemisms frequently exacerbated the issue by pretending to reflect progress while making persistent prejudice. Here is an example from a memorandum of the Acting Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (United States) addressed to the Office for Civil Rights Senior Staff, concerning “Language Reference to Persons with a Disability”: ‘As you know, the October 29, 1992, Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992 replaced the term "handicap" with the term "disability.’ This term should be used in all communications.

OCR recognizes the preference of individuals with disabilities to use phraseology that stresses the individuality of all children, youth, and adults, and then the incidence of a disability. In all our written and oral communications, care should be given to avoid expressions that many persons find offensive. Examples of phraseology to avoid and alternative suggestions are noted below.

- *Persons with a disability* or *individuals with disabilities* instead of *disabled person*.
- *Persons who are deaf* or *young people with hearing impairments* instead of *deaf people*.
- *People who are blind* or *persons with a visual impairment* instead of *blind people*.
- *A student with dyslexia* instead of a *dyslexic student*.

In addition, please avoid using phrases such as *the deaf*, *the mentally retarded*, or *the blind*. The only exception to this policy involves instances where the outdated phraseology is contained in a quote or a title, or in legislation or regulations; it is then necessary to use the citation verbatim.

The Resolution states:

“WHEREAS, the word blind accurately and clearly describes the condition of being unable to see, as well as the condition of having such limited eyesight that alternative techniques are required to do efficiently the ordinary tasks of daily living that are performed visually by those having good eyesight; and

WHEREAS, there is increasing pressure in certain circles to use a variety of euphemisms in referring to blindness or blind persons-euphemisms such as hard of seeing, visually challenged, sightless, visually impaired, people with blindness, people who are blind, and the like; and

WHEREAS, a differentiation must be made among these euphemisms: some (such as hard of seeing, visually challenged, and people with blindness) being totally unacceptable and deserving only ridicule because of their strained and ludicrous attempt to avoid such straightforward, respectable words as blindness, blind, the blind, blind person, or blind persons; others (such as visually impaired, and visually limited) being undesirable when used to avoid the word blind, and

<i>aesthetically challenged</i>	<i>ugly</i>
<i>aurally challenged</i>	<i>deaf/hard of hearing</i>
<i>cerebrally challenged</i>	<i>stupid</i>
<i>chronologically challenged</i>	<i>old</i>
<i>ethnically challenged</i>	<i>Jewish</i>
<i>gynaecologically challenged</i>	<i>menstruating</i>
<i>horizontally challenged</i>	<i>fat</i>
<i>humorously challenged</i>	<i>unfunny</i>
<i>hygienically challenged</i>	<i>dirty</i>
<i>metabolically challenged</i>	<i>dead</i>
<i>morally challenged</i>	<i>criminal</i>
<i>paternally and socially challenged</i>	<i>illegitimate. (Rees, 1992:76)</i>

We don't speak of *alcoholics*, we call them *problem drinkers*. To refer to a *person with a drinking problem* is obviously kinder than to talk about a *drunk*.

Other examples:

<i>animal companion</i>	<i>pet</i>
<i>hair disadvantage</i>	<i>bald</i>
<i>chair</i>	<i>the non-sexist term for a chairman or</i>
<i>chairwoman</i>	
<i>charm-free</i>	<i>boring, unpleasant</i>
<i>companion</i>	<i>a homosexual lover</i>
<i>consensual non-monogamy</i>	<i>adultery/swapping sex partners</i>
<i>cosmetically different</i>	<i>ugly</i>
<i>counter-factual proposition</i>	<i>lie</i>
<i>custody suite</i>	<i>police cell</i>
<i>ethically disoriented</i>	<i>dishonest</i>
<i>incomplete success</i>	<i>failure</i>
<i>involuntarily leisured</i>	<i>unemployed</i>
<i>non-traditional shopper</i>	<i>looter</i>
<i>offender</i>	<i>burglar, criminal, or murderer</i>
<i>parentally disadvantage</i>	<i>orphan</i>
<i>person of restricted growth</i>	<i>dwarf/midget</i>
<i>guest in correctional institution</i>	<i>prisoner</i>
<i>differently pleased</i>	<i>sado-masochistic</i>
<i>gender reassignment</i>	<i>sex change</i>
<i>autoeuthanasia/ self-inflicted death/ voluntary death</i>	<i>suicide</i>
<i>vertically impaired</i>	<i>short,</i>

And the list may continue. All in all, Nigel Rees tries to make clear that we have to take good care of our *verbal hygiene* (an approach to language that is both positive and negative) when we engage in any kind of linguistic act.

4. Conclusion

Euphemisms are an integral part of human language, reflecting cultural values, societal norms, and the complexities of interpersonal communication. While their use can promote politeness and sensitivity, an overreliance on euphemisms risks undermining transparency and truth. As seen in examples from politics, healthcare, and everyday discourse, euphemisms possess the power to shape perceptions in both positive and negative ways.

This duality calls for a critical approach to their use. On the one hand, euphemisms are valuable linguistic tools that enable the tactful expression of ideas and help navigate socially sensitive topics. On the other hand, their capacity to obscure harsh realities or perpetuate denial demands careful consideration of context and intent.

The study of euphemisms also highlights the dynamic relationship between language and culture. As societal attitudes evolve, so too do the euphemisms that reflect them. By examining their role in communication, we gain valuable insights into how language influences thought, perception, and behavior.

In an era increasingly shaped by political correctness and social sensitivity, the study of euphemisms remains relevant and essential. Striking a balance between linguistic tact and a commitment to clarity and honesty can foster more meaningful and effective communication.

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