

EUPHEMISMS AND DYSPHEMISMS: IN SEARCH OF A BOUNDARY LINE

Bożena Duda

University of Rzeszów

bozenaduda at yahoo co uk

Abstract

Straightforward remarks may sometimes be regarded as either an offence or an indelicacy. That is the reason why, to avoid the danger of being perceived vulgar or ill-mannered, language users prefer to employ a range of so-called concealing mechanisms available in any natural language, such as a euphemism or a dysphemism. This article is an attempt to explore the tremendously thin boundary line between the two concepts, as well as to provide examples of both.

Key words: language restriction, taboo, euphemistic dysphemism, dysphemistic euphemism

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1 On defining euphemism

“In the beginning was the word” as the Gospel (John 1:1) says and although it may certainly seem unusual to commence any account of euphemism with a quotation from the Holy Writs, the quotation clearly shows how significant what we say may turn out to be.¹ Note that, in the usual and natural course of action, first we utter then we act, which simply means that words tend to precede our deeds, whether good or bad. This is to say that words have the performative power of directing people’s lives, or at least actions. It is a commonly held belief that power should be subject to instruments of monitoring and control, and usually is, somehow – either overtly or covertly – supervised. Otherwise it may pose a certain threat to other members of a society.

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. G.A. Kleparski whom I consulted on many ideas that follow and Mr. D. Trinder who polished the entire text language-wise, thus contributing to whatever stylistic grace this text may offer.

1.1 Language Restrictions

From the very beginning of the world, according to the Christian faith, words obviously had to be kept under control. With the advent of Christianity, two of the Ten Commandments immediately set limitations on the use of language. As Exodus, 20 says, “You shall not take the name of the LORD, your God, in vain” and further “you shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.” Such and many other restrictions imposed on the users of language contribute greatly to the emergence, or reinforcement, of **taboo**. It is worth mentioning at this point that when Captain Cook introduced the word *taboo* (from Malayo-Polynesian, both Fijian *tabu* and Tongan *tapu*) into English in the late 18th century it referred, according to McArthur (1992:1019), to what may be qualified as “consecrated or limited to a special use, and therefore prohibited.” As McArthur (1992:1019) also clarifies, “in language terms, something taboo is not to be mentioned, because it is ineffably holy or unspeakably vulgar.” In turn, Polański (1995:545) stresses the importance of the “mystical identification of a word with a thing or a phenomenon the word refers to.”² Obviously, at that time nobody could possibly predict how overwhelming the career of the word *taboo* would be. More importantly, we may search for the origins of taboo subjects in various religious denominations, whether Christian, Hindu, Muslim or Judaic. Since religion normally lies at the core of the majority of societies, taboo – enrooted in the faith of the people – becomes an integral part of social life and social conduct. As a number of linguists, including Widłak (1963) or Dąbrowska (1992), argue, taboo derived from religion is to be viewed as primary taboo. More to the point, Danesi (2000:224) points out that, by extension, taboo refers to “any social prohibition or restriction that results from convention or tradition.” Taking on a more recent perspective, Chamizo Dominguez and Sánchez Benedito (2005:12) add with certain justification that “however, in our society, the last great remaining taboo seems to be sex. And although this taboo was originally related to

² The translation is of my own doing.

religious beliefs or superstitions, nowadays religious taboo does not seem to have much relevance.” This point of view goes hand in hand with Polański’s (1995:545) comment on the areas that are tabooed in today’s western societies, namely sex, effluvia, certain items of clothing, dangerous diseases and death.

What needs to be stressed at this point is the natural variability in the attitude towards sexual and/or religious taboo across temporal and cultural dimensions. Let us start by fishing out some historical cases of taboo and euphemisation. For instance, debauchery or innuendo were subject to sheer opprobrium in the Victorian age, whereas today quite a number of western societies seem to show a rather relaxed point of view on all the matters which were either unspeakable or at least were held to be unspeakable in 18th and 19th century England. A much telling illustration of how transient people’s ideas are of the appropriateness of language is the story of Sir Walter Scott’s great-aunt.³ Being presented, on her request, with a book by Alphra Behn, the aunt asked Scott to burn it as she was unable to read something which had been the source of great amusement and entertainment in upper class circles sixty years previously. What is even more intriguing is her own surprise with the reaction she experienced. On the other hand, under no circumstances would it have been conceivable to hear a member of the Victorian upper class say anything but *unmentionables* or *ineffables* for ‘trousers’, *bosom* for ‘breasts’ and *past* instead of ‘disreputable sexual history’.⁴ These two cases seem to point quite conspicuously to the fact that, what seems to be the greatest taboo for one generation may be simply a standard word or phrase for another. Note that this seems to be a part of a much broader regularity that may be discerned in the history of language. In grammar the irregularity of today (for example irregular verbs) need not be an irregularity of the past. In inflectional morphology the irregular plural (for example *datum/ data*) of the early 20th century may not be irregular in the next century when we find *data* used both for singular and plural. In sociolinguistics, a colloquialism of today need not be a colloquialism of tomorrow. For example, in the middle of the 20th century

³ Taken from Rawson (1989).

⁴ However, Ayto (2007:12) argues that this kind of “pathological reticence” might have existed only within the short margin of the society.

loo was a colloquialism not to be used in polite circles; it has since, however, become a standard word in English without any air of colloquialism or vulgarity.

Let us go back to Victorian times again and stress the fact that it was the 19th century that witnessed the implementation of laws which – as O’Donnell (1992:12) remarks – were to serve a guardian function. Among others, these were the Obscene Publications Act and the Comstock Postal Act introduced in Great Britain in 1857 and in the United States of America in 1873 respectively. Such legal restrictions were implemented with the full weight of the law, and even more than a century later instances of charges on the basis of these laws were not unheard of. O’Donnell (1992:15) illustrates the point with the case of a shop-assistant who was taken to court and charged with the use of “obscene, vulgar or profane language.” Although the charge was subsequently dropped, such instances, when taken as a whole, provide a body of unquestionable evidence that, as O’Donnell (1992:28) puts it, “some sort of restriction on language in any society is inevitable.”

1.2 Building Euphemistic Blocks over Taboo

Regardless of the formal restrictions that are imposed on some languages, or – at least – on some aspects of communicative activity, people in certain situations have a tendency to avoid mentioning anything that could be considered offensive, vulgar, disgusting or too straightforward. The term **euphemism**, as defined by McArthur (1992:387), is commonly understood to mean a word or an expression which is delicate and inoffensive and is used to replace or cover a term that seems to be either taboo, too harsh or simply inappropriate for a given conversational exchange. In literary studies euphemism is described by Sławiński *et al.* (2002:132) as “a word or expression used to replace a certain word which for some reasons (of, for example, aesthetics, ritual or

ensorship) cannot be directly employed in an utterance.”⁵ In language studies, Allan and Burridge (1991:11) provide a customary, yet comprehensive, definition, which goes along the following lines:

“A euphemism is used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face: either one’s own face or, through giving offense, that of the audience, or of some third party.”

As for the etymological roots of the term, *per se*, it is worth stressing that the element *eu* – derived from Greek – denotes ‘well, sounding good’ and *phēmē* means ‘speaking’. Along similar lines, both Pei and Gaynor (1954:68-69) and Danesi (2000:89) characterise euphemism as the substitution of a more pleasant or less direct word for an unpleasant or distasteful one. Rawson (1981:1), in turn, remarks that euphemisms “[...] are so deeply embedded in our language that few of us, even those who pride themselves on being plainspoken, ever get through a day without using them.” The reason for this may be, as Polański (1995:138) and Gołąb, Heinz and Polański (1970:164) state, the neutral emotional load of euphemistic expressions which seems to attenuate the negative illocutionary force a taboo word or phrase has.

When we turn our attention to the present-day range of euphemisation, it is impossible to understate the all-pervading presence of euphemisms in natural languages. And thus, for example, the death of a close person is euphemized to English *the loss* or *passing away* and to Polish *strata* ‘loss’ or *odejście* ‘passing away’ for the simple reason of sympathy, delicacy or fear. The second most deeply enrooted tabooed topic of today seems to be the sphere of sexual activity. Rather than talking bluntly about it with the use of four-letter words (despite their modern ubiquity), people prefer employing a whole range of words and expressions based on such conceptual metaphors as SEX IS

⁵ The translation is of my own doing.

EATING or SEX IS CONSUMPTION.⁶ The fundamental reason for this is the feeling of badly-understood embarrassment as the ultimate outcome of a long-lasting and all-prevailing moral prudery, which used to be (and continues to be) cultivated in some societies and in certain social circles. Yet another conspicuous area of euphemisation appears to be any topic connected with racial or sexual otherness.⁷ The already widespread and continually growing trend of political correctness makes people both more aware and genteel towards the aforementioned minorities, especially when referred to from the white heterosexual perspective. Suffice it to mention the preference for (in English) *dark-skinned*, (in Polish) *ciemnoskóry* ‘dark-skinned’ or, in Britain in the 1950s, simply *immigrant* for ‘non-white person’; or Polish *kochający inaczej* ‘lit. loving differently’ and English *same gender oriented* instead of ‘homosexual’.

It seems that both the omnipresence and the figurative nature of euphemism constitute the core features of this linguistic mechanism, which serves such a crucial function in human communication. Undoubtedly, very few people fancy the idea of being labelled as either *rude* or *coarse*. Instead, in a typical A↔B act of communication, they would rather resort to an auspicious term in order to be perceived as politically correct or so as not to hurt someone’s feelings. Accordingly, as Chamizo Dominguez and Sánchez Benedito (2005:8) argue, euphemism – apart from its main function of concealing or veiling something unpleasant – serves other minor functions that may be itemised as follows:

- 1) the politeness or respect function,
- 2) the dignifying function,
- 3) the function of attenuating a painful evocation,
- 4) the function of naming the taboo object.

⁶ For more on sex-related metaphors see Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Lakoff and Turner (1989), Allan and Burridge (1991:86-95), Chamizo Dominguez and Sánchez Benedito (2005) or Crespo Fernández (2008) to mention but a few examples.

⁷ On the issue of sexual otherness see Kudła (2010) among others.

In a somewhat general sense, one may say that all the functions are at work to a varied degree, depending basically on the social context of a speaker and the level of their delicacy and/or their involvement in a given situation. It is an undeniable fact that, in present-day communication, one may use *depart* in English or in Polish *odejść* one day and the next *kick the bucket* or *kopnąć w kalendarz* (in Polish ‘lit. kick the calendar’) and in both cases refer to the same concept of death. The questions that inevitably arise in this context are the questions pertaining to why people tend to choose one and not the other language tool, and whether both can and do convey the same functions.

2 The Category of X-phemisms: Pizza or the Melting Pot?

To put it bluntly, the answer to these seemingly simple questions is neither obvious nor straightforward. Allan and Burridge (2006:29-34) draw a fine distinction between *euphemism*, which they refer to as ‘sweet-talking’; the mechanism of *dysphemism*, or, in other words, ‘speaking offensively’; and *orthophemism*, which derives from Greek *ortho-* meaning ‘proper, straight, normal’. McArthur (1992:328) defines dysphemism as “the use of a negative or disparaging expression to describe something or someone” with a note that its special subtype (which is cruel and offensive) is **cacophemism**,⁸ which derives from Greek *kakós* ‘bad’. It appears that the sole factor determining the choice of one against another is the intention of the speaker; a classic example being the polite *poo*, used mainly either by or to children, the offensive *s*hit*, especially as an interjection, and the bookish or neutral *faeces*. Yet another case in point is the group of words in which *toilet* is treated as standard,⁹ *loo*, in

⁸ For the sake of not running the risk of offending the innocent, we shall employ the inside marking of the quoted cacophemisms in the form of an asterisk after the first letter, for example *f*uck*.

⁹ It is worth noting at this point that *toilet*, which indicates the concept of ‘washing’, used to be employed as a euphemism for ‘lavatory’ which was considered too impolite for the society. With the passage of

current usage, is a genteel form and *s*hitouse* is reserved for those that wish to be impolite or vulgar.¹⁰ Such trios that, generally speaking, refer to one and the same denotatum can be multiplied in any natural language.¹¹ However, as Chamizo Dominguez and Sánchez Benedito (2005:7) put it:

“[...] in many cases the dividing line between euphemism and dysphemism can be clearly drawn, in many other cases that line is so utterly blurred that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to establish the boundaries between the two figures of speech.”

One has grounds to say that it is the context in which the person speaks that plays the most crucial role in distinguishing between the cases of euphemism and dysphemism. Taking present-day English *s*hitouse* as an example, it is quite clearly vulgar and impolite when employed in a social, formal or semi-formal conversation among strangers. It goes without saying, however, that this word would never be treated dysphemistically in an army squad context. Allan and Burridge (2006:32) go as far as to argue that, among a group of soldiers, *loo* may be perceived as a dysphemism because of its insulting load, as if someone was talking to them with baby language.

It seems that the justification for the problem in determining the line of distinction between euphemism or dysphemism may be sought in **diachronic semantics**. As Kröll (1984:12) points out, “what today is a euphemism, may tomorrow be a dysphemism,” which doubtlessly works in the reverse direction too. A suitable illustration here is the story of the word *gay* which, according to the *OED*, started its drift in the 14th century when it held the positively loaded sense ‘light-hearted,

time it lost its euphemistic power and needed other terms to replace it in a ‘sweet-talking’ way (Enright 2005:10-11).

¹⁰ Note, however, that from the diachronic point of view, *loo* was still 30 years or so ago considered a vulgar slang term that has – with the passage of time – lost its offensive stylistic stigmata.

¹¹ In Polish the counterparts of the trios mentioned would be *kupa* for ‘poo’, *g*ówno* for ‘shit’ and *odchody* for ‘faeces’ or *toaleta* for ‘loo’, *s*ralnia* for ‘shithouse’ and *WC* for ‘toilet’.

exuberantly cheerful, sportive, merry' (1310>1880). The 17th century brought a euphemistic extension to 'of loose or immoral life' (1637>1910). Subsequently, a euphemism developed into a sexual dysphemism when, in the 19th century, the lexical item *gay* acquired the negatively loaded sense 'leading an immoral life, living by prostitution' (1825>1885) with reference to women kind. Rawson (1981:120) observes that the further development of *gay* must have been – at least to an extent – inspired by the specifics of the homo- and heterosexual underworld of the Victorians. At that time the greatest overtly tabooed topic of all was sex and anything connected with the human body that served the purpose of sex making. Not surprisingly, the dysphemistic load remained with the lexical item *gay*, which merely changed its overt link for the conceptual category from FEMALE HUMAN BEING to MALE HUMAN BEING in the early 20th century. *Gay* remained both vulgar and offensive well into the 1970s when it slowly began to neutralize its dysphemistic nature and finally entered the standard lexicon, washing off the 'dirt' that had clung for so long.

Grygiel and Kleparski (2007:88-90) observe that both "[...] taboo and euphemisms are linguistic mechanisms, which are influenced or – to put it more adequately – are created by the working of both overt and covert social and psychological factors." True as it is, the generalisation seems to apply fully to all three mechanisms; that is euphemism, dysphemism and orthophemism. The first two – as opposed to the last one – must be treated as figurative in nature and should be viewed as kinds of conceptual metaphors in accordance with the theoretical framework proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). A particularly intriguing instance of the working of metaphorical mappings based on X-phemisation is, as observed by Kiełtyka (2008:137-139), the process of animal metaphorisation, or **zoosemy**.¹² This may be instanced with the zoosemic development of such lexical items as *alley cat* for 'a prostitute' or *bitch* for 'a peevish, wrangling woman' in English or *ropucha* 'toad' to refer to 'an old fat and ugly woman' in Polish.

¹² On this issue see Kleparski (1990), Grygiel and Kleparski (2007).

Taking a lexicographic perspective on the way the three mechanisms in question are presented in dictionaries, one feels obliged to quote Osuchowska (2010:30), who says that:

“The treatment of euphemisms and dysphemisms is yet another grey area. Whereas in the case of the latter, one may safely conclude that users’ needs should be satisfied by having the meaning explained and a warning to avoid the word being defined, entries for euphemisms (such as *social exclusion*) should probably supply the level of detail needed for encoding, not just decoding.”

Among other causes and conditionings, the problem lies, as observed by Burchfield (1986:15) in the alphabetical organization of dictionaries. It remains a fact of life that there is a general lack of lexicographic works which would account for the synonymic strings from a given period of time with all the necessary information about their evaluative sociolinguistic load. This may be a consequence of the extreme difficulty in unscrambling fully and explicitly the context of the writers of the past, as well as understanding and interpreting correctly the complex nature of the long-gone social arrangements and attitudes. Yet, a seemingly attractive solution to all the aforementioned doubts is propounded by Allan and Burridge (1991, 2006), who suggest the compilation of characteristic features and functions of both euphemism and dysphemism in one and the same lexical item. Acting on their advice, let us now direct our attention to this problem.

2.1 Euphemistic Dysphemism

On different communicative occasions people are bound emotionally by various circumstances and tend to choose between ‘sweet-talking’ terms, those of a more offensive nature, or – circumstances permitting – they try to remain neutral. There are,

however, situations when feelings are mixed and the locution chosen stands in opposition to the illocutionary force. Such is the case with swearing using modified terms. To say that, in current usage, the English lexical item *S*hit!* is a clear example of dysphemism is relatively obvious, but the exclamations *Sugar!* or *Shoot!* are not vulgar and only a few people would feel offended on hearing them. That is the reason they are called **euphemistic dysphemisms**.

An analogous motivation, this time of the earlier mentioned biblical restriction which forbids us not to take the name of God in vain, leads to phonological, thus euphemistic, modifications of the names *God*, *Jesus*, *Christ* or *Jesus Christ* into *Gosh!*, *Geeze!*, *Chrissake!*, *cripes!*. Uttering them in the original form may bring about the opprobrium of those that treat such violations of the second of the Ten Commandments as a case of blasphemy. As Allan and Burrige (2006:39) observe “a euphemistic dysphemism exists to cause less face-loss or offence than an out-and-out dysphemism (although it will not always succeed in doing so).” Similarly, as Kleparski and Grygiel (2003:19) explain, Puritans used legislation to censor the use of the name of God, which led to the employment of the so-called apostrophised forms in oaths or exclamations, such as ‘*zounds* for *God’s wounds* or ‘*slid* for *God’s lid*.

2.2 Dysphemistic Euphemism

Quite the reverse is the case with an impolite, vulgar or flippant form to refer to a neutral or, sometimes, serious situation. When the illocutionary force is neutral or calling for euphemistic treatment and the locution is either jocular or offensive, then we are entitled to talk about **dysphemistic euphemisms**. One overwhelming tabooed issue that has always provoked fear, or at least unease, is death. As Enright (2005:29) observes, humans’ long-lasting avoidance of the topic seems to function as a kind of a trigger for a wealth of X-phemisms used with reference to death. A puzzling story, for example, is hidden behind one of the classic expressions referring to dying, namely *kick*

the bucket.¹³ The origin itself is disputable since the *OED* suggests two possible ways of development of the lexical item. Presumably, *bucket* was adopted from O.F. *buquet* ‘balance, beam’ or *buket* ‘washing tub, milk-pail’. As for the former, its connection with the concept of death seems to be strictly bound with a slaughtered animal hanging from a beam and twitching. The latter supposedly comes from the idea of an execution or suicide by hanging. In either case a person about to die has to kick something he or she stands on: a bucket or a stool (Ayto 2007:241). Whatever the ultimate origin, the locution in this case fulfils the function of degrading the concept of death and making it seem less frightening. The illocutionary force, on the other hand, is euphemistic.

Yet another instance of a neutral, yet touchy, area encoded with a whole array of dysphemistic or semi-dysphemistic terms is menstruation; classic examples that may be quoted from present-day English usage are *have the curse*, *off the roof* or *flying the red flag* or *mieć ciotkę* (lit. ‘have an aunt’) in Polish. For some, however, as argued by Allan and Burridge (2006:39), expressions such as *bleeding like a stuck pig* or *ride the red wave* are pure instances of dysphemisms because of their – sociolinguistically determined – strong vulgar load. Cockney Rhyming Slang undoubtedly deserves a mention at this point, as well. A whole wealth of rhyming expressions, such as *Bristols* (from *Bristol cities* ‘titties’) or *nellie dean* (for *queen* ‘homosexual’),¹⁴ offer substantial evidence that the jocular locution may, and in fact frequently does, cover the euphemistic illocutionary point.

¹³The Polish equivalent *kopnąć w kalendarz* (lit. ‘kick the calendar’) also seems to contain the element of degrading the concept of death with a dose of jocular note.

¹⁴ For more on sociolinguistic factors in word-formation and morphological processes, see Körtvélyessy 2010.

3. Concluding Remarks

Although the authority of Apostle Paul (Ephesians (4:29)) warns against the foul use of language, the truth – as Oscar Wilde¹⁵ puts it – “is rarely pure, and never simple.” The main aim set to this paper was to make a case-marked search for a boundary line between the category of language euphemisms and the category of dysphemisms. The functions of which are by no means the same. In short, euphemisms serve to dignify or express politeness and/ or respect. The elements which are clearly absent from the scope of dysphemisms which serve to attenuate a painful evocation or name a taboo object.

It was hinted long ago by such giants of structuralism as Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), Stephen Ullmann (1957) and, more recently, by Kardela and Kleparski (1990) and Kleparski (1997) that the explanation of many language phenomena must be aided by assuming a panchronic standpoint. It was not accidental that in this paper many cases of euphemisms and dysphemisms from various historical epochs were given and discussed. This was intended to show the universality of both mechanisms and, secondly, that the immediate conclusion emerging from our discussion is that the explanation of synchronic states must be sought in history. More to the point, although the boundary line between the processes of euphemisation and dysphemisation is not always clear-cut synchronically, historical evidence may help one to find arguments that will make it possible to classify in one of the two relevant categories. Finally, despite the apparently clear, albeit subtle, distinction between the types of X-phemisms, it is vital to point out the indispensable role of the context and the intentions of the speakers in their choice of expressions.

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¹⁵ *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Act I.

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