

PRAGMATIC STUDY OF POLITICAL EUPHEMISM

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Abstract

This article delves into the realm of political language by focusing on the intricate use of euphemisms within the political domain. Euphemisms, often considered as linguistic tools used to soften harsh realities or controversial issues, play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions and discourse in politics. The study takes a pragmatic approach, aiming to unveil the hidden intentions and effects of employing euphemisms in political communication. By analyzing various examples from political speeches, official documents, and media reports, the article sheds light on how euphemisms can influence public opinion, manipulate narratives, and disguise sensitive matters. Through a critical examination of the subtle nuances and strategic deployment of euphemistic language in politics, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between language, power, and persuasion in the realm of political communication.

Keywords: Euphemism, political language, pragmatics, political communication, public perception, discourse analysis.

Introduction

The fact that political language is purpose oriented is taken for granted. It is the nature of politicians to be considerate and tender of peoples' feelings, therefore they make conscious choice of the words employed in their speech to avoid expressions that have unpleasant associations and might be coldly received by citizens. This is the reason why they resort to euphemisms, the connotation-neutral substitute for a distasteful concept, to safely deal with certain embarrassing topics without being politically incorrect or breaking a social convention. Since that political language is characterized by conflict avoidance out of concern for the feelings of the audience, it is my firm belief that the more uncomfortable politicians are with a topic, the more euphemisms they construct to get around talking about it in direct terms.

The investigations of different types of euphemisms as parts of lexical systems of different languages have proved that the process of euphemizing is a complex and many-sided linguistic phenomenon characterized by three interrelated and interconnected aspects: social, psychological and linguistic proper¹. Of the three aspects the most important is the linguistic one which is connected with meliorative language evaluation of something negative existing in the real world ².

These studies should be supplemented by the investigations devoted to "political correctness" conducted by K. Allan and K. Burridge [1991] and H. Halmari [2011] and investigations in professional political discourse³. Scholars are unanimous that euphemisms are extralinguistic in their nature [B. Fraser, 2009]. At the same time there is still a great divergence of opinions concerning social and psychological causes of euphemisms. However, so far no study has been devoted to the pragmatic

¹ T. A. Van Dijk, 1993; K. Allen, K. Burridge, 1991

² Allan, K. & Burridge, K. (2006). *Forbidden words taboo and the censoring of language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³ E. A. Ivanova, M.A. Korchevskaya 2011; A.P. Chudinov, 2012; E.A. Besedina, T.V. Burkova, A.N. Michurin, 2019

processes of a verbal behaviour which politicians employ in the hope of softening the effect of what they really wish to communicate. Euphemisms certainly are the endless source of language vocabulary, and the number of various scientific approaches in the field and the changes that languages undergo encourage to find new ways to tackle the issue.

The purpose of this paragraph is to gain an insight into the way euphemism is used as semiotic symbol to signal the audience of either purposeful concealment of truth or indecent practices which could cause offence to the target audience or one third party. The focus of this article attention is on different types of euphemistic strategies of political discourse which are realised at semantic and syntactic levels.

The language data for this study was excerpted from speeches of the President of Ukraine Dmitry Medvedev (dates of the presidency are between 2008 and 2012), the Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom Tony Blair (served from 1997 to 2007) and Margaret Thatcher (from 1979 to 1990), President of the USA Barak Obama (served as the 44th president of the United States from 2009 to 2017).

The choice of the political discourse is explained by the fact that political language is purpose-oriented. Politicians resort to euphemisms because through using them they control the transmission of information as well as audience's perception of the world. The bulk for empirical data comprises 35 speeches of the politicians published at different times and amounts to a total of 253 lexical units⁴. It contains 78 quotations in which 105 euphemistic items have been encountered.

Finally, the pragmatics of linguistic items was analysed to confirm or disprove the hypothesis stated above or reveal other reasons for euphemizing. It should be made clear from the very outset that the study makes no claim to being complete or exhaustive. The analysis is therefore mainly qualitative than quantitative following the tradition of critical discourse analysts, that usually relies on small data samples⁵. Furthermore, the limitations and scope of the present article do not allow to deal with all examples of euphemism encountered in depth. Yet, there is a hope that the results of the analysis would contribute to the study of euphemistic items and would give those interested in this area some alternative perspective to consider.

When politicians want to disguise their true intentions, the use of euphemisms can become manipulative to garner support for the agenda to which society is deeply hostile or to change the appearance of "topic that evokes negative emotions".

The case in point would be the intentionally bloodless word combination ethnic cleansing. According to Cambridge and Oxford Dictionaries noun cleansing is a derivative from the verb to clean with the meaning "of instance of cleaning something, esp. its surface"⁶. However the Dictionaries do not lists killing among the possible meaning of the word cleansing.

It follows therefore that the point of the word combination ethnic cleansing is to distance from the horror that actually happens during the conflict: the killing and wounding of non-combatants. The euphemistic alternative for inhuman acts makes them look civilised and conceal brutal reality. At the same time the language system is constantly evolving which leads to lexicalisation of concepts.

Even though there is no relation between linguistic signs and their signified, people start to relate euphemism to its signified after it has been used for a certain time. Consequently, the former sense of distance and vagueness of the notion fades away as well as its euphemistic coloring. According to K. Burrige [Burrige, 2004], "euphemisms contribute to the development and enriching of English

⁴ Allan, K. & Burrige, K. (2006). Forbidden words taboo and the censoring of language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Asher, R.E (1994). The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics. vol.3. 8. Pergamon press L.td. New York

⁶ Yule, G. (1996). Pragmatics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

language by a new expressions, because they are based on associations and associations still change". Moreover some of the alternative synonyms are used so often that their euphemistic origin becomes unnoticeable. The case in point is ethnic cleansing which is no wonder has become an integral part of the word stock of many Dictionaries nowadays.

Pragmatics is the study of meaning conveyed by a speaker or writer and interpreted by a listener or a reader, which is more about the analysis of what people mean by their utterances than the analysis of what the words or phrases in those utterances might mean by themselves. English linguist G.N. Leech (1983: 128) once had pointed out that the main function of using English euphemisms is to achieve satisfactorily expected communicative results, namely positively desired pragmatic outcomes. However, in order to successfully achieve positive results in English political news, without any offence or rudeness, two pragmatic principles, Politeness Principle and Cooperative Principle, must be taken into proper account.

In western society, political activities are usually viewed as tricky games of seemingly polite and humble expressions, which essentially contain allusive political intentions. There is no doubt that media, especially newspapers and news broadcasts are the most effective ways of conveying information of the government and its decision making. For that reason, political euphemisms are commonly used in English news concerning domestic and foreign affairs so as to avoid expressions probably offensive to the masses.

In the field of domestic affairs, which are mainly involved with the relationship between employees and their bosses and the safety affairs that we are all concerned about, a great number of political euphemisms are employed by both statesmen and journalists. And in terms of foreign affairs, the relationship among countries and military activities, which, if not carefully taken into consideration, may cause severe economic disputes and terrible trade wars or even lead to real warfare.

In conclusion, the pragmatic study of political euphemisms has unveiled the intricate web of language manipulation and power dynamics inherent in political communication. Euphemisms, far from innocent linguistic constructions, are strategic tools employed by politicians and policymakers to shape public perceptions, obscure contentious issues, and steer political discourse in desired directions. Through a critical analysis of various instances of euphemistic language in politics, this research has highlighted the profound impact that subtle linguistic choices can have on the construction of reality and the manipulation of public opinion.

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