

SEMANTIC AND STRUCTURAL ASPECTS OF EUPHEMISMS

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Akramova Diyora Khaitbaevna

diyora.salimova12@gmail.com

Tashkent State University of Uzbek Language and Literature

Abstract: This article examines the semantic and structural characteristics of euphemisms and their role in modern communication. The study analyzes similarities and differences in euphemistic expressions used in areas such as business, medicine, politics, and social interaction. Euphemisms are commonly employed to replace taboo, offensive, harsh or socially sensitive expressions with softer and more acceptable alternatives. In addition, they may serve stylistic purposes by making ordinary language appear more refined and polite. The paper also explores euphemistic strategies from a pragmatic perspective and discusses their communicative functions in social discourse.

Keywords: euphemism, taboo, pragmatics, connotation, semantic change, indirect expression, politeness, communication

Introduction. Euphemisms are widely used in everyday communication, often without speakers consciously recognizing their presence. Although they are common in different spheres of life, their classification remains complex because no universally accepted standard exists. Linguists classify euphemisms according to semantic, structural, and pragmatic criteria. As a result, euphemisms may be studied from multiple perspectives depending on their linguistic function and communicative purpose. The term *euphemism* originates from the Greek language and literally means “speaking in a pleasant or favorable way” (Enright, 2004). Initially, euphemisms were mainly associated with taboo expressions, particularly those connected with religion, death, and fear (Crystal, 2002). Over time, however, the scope of euphemistic language expanded to include words and expressions replacing vulgar, embarrassing, impolite or socially unacceptable terms.

Materials and Methods. Researchers have proposed various definitions of euphemism. Holder describes euphemisms as vague or indirect expressions used to substitute inappropriate or offensive language (Holder, 2008). Hornby, on the other hand, defines euphemisms as linguistic units that indirectly refer to unpleasant or embarrassing subjects in order to make them appear more socially acceptable (Hornby, 2005). The present study relies on comparative and descriptive methods in order to analyze semantic categories and pragmatic functions of euphemisms.

Examples from English language discourse are examined to demonstrate how euphemistic expressions operate in different communicative situations.

Discussion and Results. According to Rawson (1981), euphemisms can generally be divided into two major categories: positive euphemisms and negative euphemisms. Positive euphemisms exaggerate or elevate the meaning of an expression, making it sound more respectable or prestigious. Such euphemisms are especially common in professional titles and public communication. For example, the expression *exterminating engineer* may replace *rat catcher*, while *beautician* may substitute *hairdresser*. These expressions increase the perceived social value of occupations and reduce possible negative associations. Positive euphemisms are frequently found in political, military and commercial vocabulary. Negative euphemisms, by contrast, are used to soften or conceal unpleasant realities. Their primary purpose is to reduce the emotional impact of taboo or sensitive concepts. These euphemisms are often connected with subjects such as death, illness, sexuality and social restrictions. Another important distinction is made between conscious and unconscious euphemisms. Unconscious euphemisms have become so deeply integrated into language that speakers rarely recognize their euphemistic origin. For instance, the word *cemetery* gradually replaced *graveyard*, while *indisposition* became an indirect substitute for *disease*. Conscious euphemisms, however, are intentionally used by speakers in order to avoid direct or impolite expressions. During social interaction, listeners usually understand the hidden meaning behind these indirect forms. Expressions such as *powder her nose* or *make a phone call* at a dinner party may indirectly refer to visiting the restroom.

Semantic Categories of Euphemisms

1. **Occupational Euphemisms.** In many Western societies, intellectual professions are traditionally viewed as more prestigious than manual labor, and this distinction is often reflected in salary differences and social attitudes. As a result, occupations are frequently associated with varying levels of social status. To avoid embarrassment or reduce the negative perception of certain low-paid or socially undervalued jobs, English speakers commonly employ euphemistic expressions. For instance, the term *agent* is often added to job titles to create a more professional impression, as in *press agent* instead of publicist. Similarly, expressions such as *exterminating engineer* for rat catcher, *sanitation engineer* for garbage collector, and *hairstylist* or *beautician* for barber or hairdresser are used to elevate occupational prestige. Other examples include *unwaged* for unemployed, *funeral director* for undertaker, and *environmental hygienist* for janitor. Modern English has also increasingly replaced gender-specific occupational titles with gender-neutral alternatives. Terms such as *spokesperson* instead of spokesman, *camera operator* for cameraman, *firefighter* for fireman, *mail carrier* for postman, *flight attendant* for

stewardess, *chairperson* for chairman, and *head teacher* for headmistress demonstrate this tendency. Unlike English, Uzbek and Russian languages generally contain fewer occupation names restricted to one gender (Enright, 45). According to Holder, contemporary English contains a wide range of euphemistic expressions associated with unemployment and dismissal. Phrases such as *reduction in force*, *redundant*, *relieve*, *headcount reduction*, *to be selected out* or *seeking new challenges* are frequently used instead of directly referring to job loss. Euphemistic language is also common in the vocabulary of real estate agencies, where descriptions are carefully designed to highlight positive features while concealing disadvantages. Estate agents often avoid directly mentioning the actual age or condition of a property. Expressions such as *Georgian house*, *ante-bellum*, *period property* or *ideal of modernization* are typically used to create a more attractive impression for potential buyers (Holder, 56-58).

2. Disease Euphemisms. Euphemisms related to diseases are commonly used to reduce the emotional discomfort associated with serious illnesses. Instead of directly naming certain medical conditions, people often prefer softer and less alarming expressions. For example, the phrase *long illness* may be used instead of cancer, while *social disease* can refer to illnesses such as syphilis or AIDS. Likewise, *lung trouble* is sometimes employed as a milder alternative to tuberculosis. In the case of mental or physical disabilities, indirect language is also preferred in order to avoid sounding offensive. Rather than explicitly describing someone as suffering from psychosis, speakers may simply say that the person is "*a little confused*". Similarly, the expression *hard of hearing* is generally considered more polite and acceptable than the direct term deaf.

3. Death Euphemisms. Because death is viewed with fear and sadness in many cultures, people frequently avoid referring to it directly. Instead, they rely on euphemistic expressions that sound softer, more respectful or emotionally comforting. Consequently, numerous alternative phrases have developed to describe death indirectly. Common examples include *breathe one's last*, *fall asleep*, *go west*, *join the majority*, *lay down one's life*, *pass away*, *pay the debt of nature*, *reach a better world*, *be at peace*, *return to the dust*, and *sleep for ever*. These expressions help speakers discuss death in a less harsh and more socially acceptable manner.

4. Sexual Euphemisms. Topics connected with sexuality are often considered sensitive or embarrassing; therefore, euphemistic language is widely used in this sphere. Certain indirect expressions replace direct references to sexual identity, behavior or social status. For instance, phrases such as *the great divide*, *willing woman*, *gay boy*, and *lost girl* may be used instead of directly mentioning divorce, promiscuous women, homosexual men or prostitutes. Such euphemisms help reduce social discomfort and maintain politeness during communication.

5. Crime Euphemisms. Euphemisms are also present in criminal vocabulary, where indirect terms are used to soften or disguise illegal activities and criminal identities. Expressions such as *five-fingers* for pickpocket, *gentleman of the road* for robber, *hero of the underground* for heroin, and *candy man* for drug dealer illustrate how euphemistic language can obscure the negative nature of crime-related concepts.

6. Political Euphemisms. Political discourse makes extensive use of euphemisms because governments and public institutions often attempt to minimize the unpleasant impact of certain events or actions. Euphemistic language enables political authorities to present controversial issues in a less negative or more acceptable way. For example, the expression *student unrest* may replace student strike, while phrases such as *police action*, *search* and *clear operations*, and war games can be used instead of directly referring to aggression, massacre, or military exercises. In addition to semantic classifications, Warren (1992) proposed a model that categorizes euphemisms according to both semantic and structural characteristics. According to this approach, structural euphemisms involve word-formation processes, phonetic modifications and borrowed lexical items. Warren's classification demonstrates that euphemisms may differ not only in meaning but also in their linguistic structure.

Euphemistic Strategies from a Pragmatic Perspective. Pragmatics studies language in relation to its users and communicative context. Scholars such as Crystal (1997) and Yule (1996) emphasize that meaning is not determined solely by words themselves, but also by the intentions of speakers and the interpretation of listeners. Euphemisms play a significant role in maintaining politeness during communication. Speakers often avoid direct expressions that may offend others or threaten their social image. Instead of using words like *ugly* or *fat*, English speakers may prefer expressions such as *plain-looking*, *full-figured*, or *big-boned*. Another major pragmatic function of euphemisms is their connection with taboo. Topics including death, bodily functions, sexuality and illness are traditionally avoided in direct conversation. Consequently, euphemisms serve as socially acceptable substitutes for sensitive concepts. Euphemisms may also function as instruments of concealment. Political authorities and media organizations frequently employ vague expressions in order to hide unpleasant realities or reduce public anxiety. Economic crises may be referred to as *economic slowdowns*, while military conflicts are often presented as *peacekeeping operations*. In advertising and commercial communication, euphemisms perform a persuasive function. Companies use attractive language to improve the public image of products and services. Expressions such as *pre-owned vehicle* instead of *used car* or *compact car* instead of *small car* illustrate how euphemistic wording influences consumer perception. Finally, euphemisms may have a tactical psychological effect. For example, airlines avoid using the phrase *vomit bag*

and instead write *motion discomfort bag*, thereby reducing negative emotional reactions among passengers.

Conclusion. The analysis demonstrates that euphemisms are an essential component of human communication and reflect both linguistic and social values. They enable speakers to discuss sensitive topics indirectly while maintaining politeness and social harmony. However, repeated association with unpleasant meanings may eventually weaken the euphemistic effect, causing such expressions to lose their original indirectness. From a pragmatic perspective, euphemisms perform several important functions, including politeness, concealment, persuasion, taboo avoidance and psychological influence. Their widespread use in politics, medicine, business and everyday communication confirms their significant role in modern language systems.

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