


<h2>Euphemism and Lexical Synonymy</h2>		<p style="text-align: center;">Linguistics</p> <p>Keywords: euphemism, synonym, language, connotation, lexical choice.</p>
<p>Leonard Danglli</p>	<p>University of Tirana. Faculty of Foreign Languages. Department of English Language. Affiliation: Linguistics. Tirana, Albania</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">Abstract</p> <p>This paper discusses the linguistic phenomenon of euphemism and the contribution it makes to the creation of a great number of synonymic sets in language. Euphemisms emerge in language due to the need of language users to use less offensive, embarrassing or direct words and replace them with more pleasant or indirect words. However, the emergence of euphemisms does not mean that the already existing words go out of use. On the contrary, they coexist in language, mainly in the form of synonymic sets, allowing the language user to choose between one or the other according to the context of use and intended function of the word. The paper also elaborates on the areas which attract the greatest number of euphemisms, such as death, religion, bodily functions, sex, and disease. Nevertheless, there is a growing tendency to use euphemism in such areas as politics, business and war. Numerous examples are provided throughout the paper to illustrate the arguments.</p>		

Lexical synonymy develops in all natural languages due to a number of factors, both linguistic and non-linguistic. Synonyms may emerge and proliferate as a result of the interaction between different languages (lexical borrowing) and dialects (dialectal variation), but special attention must be paid to the efforts made by the users of a certain language to convey a myriad of semantic shades by selecting the accurate synonym of the synonymic pair or set. One such effort is the tendency by language users to use the “appropriate” word in a given context, with appropriateness meaning avoidance of unwanted effects. Such “appropriateness” is frequently ensured by euphemism, which serves as an abundant source of lexical synonyms in language.

“As Denham and Lobeck (2013) state: euphemisms are words and phrases used to avoid offending (by directly addressing taboo subjects) or to deliberately obscure actual (usually unpleasant) meanings.” Therefore, euphemism³ serves as an important source of synonymy, with words of pleasant, or at least not offensive connotation replacing others of embarrassing, indecent or unpleasant connotation. Euphemism makes a word, which according to Edmonds (1999) is “taboo or dispreferred”, be expressed in more “indirect” way according to Crystal (1995).

The words *coffin* and *casket* denote the same referent. The euphemistic word *casket* fully overlaps in denotation with the word *coffin*, but the connotations of the latter become “milder”, thus making the whole expression less frightening or painful. The substitution occurs because the language user is using a linguistic expression to show discretion and sensitivity towards the feelings of the interlocutor/s. It must be highlighted that this is one of the main functions performed by euphemisms in language. Nevertheless, the lexical and semantic opposition synonym (negative synonym) – euphemism (positive synonym) means that the language user can choose one or the other depending on the context and the purpose of using one instead of the other. For example, taking into account the dominating atmosphere of the book “Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus” by Shelley, the author selects the synonym which normally suits the “coffin-like” atmosphere pervading the book, namely the synonym “coffin”, which is used five times in the novel:

“This last blow overcame her, and she knelt by Beaufort’s coffin weeping bitterly, when my father entered the chamber.”

³ From Greek language *euphēmismos*, from *euphēmisein* “use auspicious words”, from *eu* “well” + *phēmē* “speaking”.

“I gazed on the picture of my mother, which stood over the mantel-piece. It was an historical subject, painted at my father’s desire, and represented Caroline Beaufort in an agony of despair, kneeling by the coffin of her dead father.”

“I entered the room where the corpse lay and was led up to the coffin.”

“...or surely I should have died on the coffin of Henry.”

“As he hung over the coffin...”

The same euphemistic synonymous pair should have existed in the lexicon of the New York Times journalist (1989) when he wrote “A ceremony, a casket and the dead are taken home”. However, he selected the “better” word “casket” as he was writing about a tragedy which needed less painful words to describe.

This synonym – euphemism opposition is frequently used by the media when reporting news consisting of deep emotional associations. For example, the death of Steve Jobs was reported by Huffington Post as “*Steve Jobs passes away*”. The journalist has therefore opted for *pass away* instead of *die*. The same usage is found in Charles Dickens’s “A Tale of two cities”:

“When a name was called, its owner stepped apart into a spot reserved for those who were announced as being thus fatally recorded. Charles Evremonde, called Darnay, had reason to know the usage; he had seen hundreds pass away so.”

“The hours went on as he walked to and fro, and the clocks struck the numbers he would never hear again. Nine gone forever, ten gone forever, eleven gone forever, twelve coming on to pass away.”

Euphemisms tend to emerge and proliferate in a number of concepts or activities. They generally relate to such notions as death, drinking, certain physiological processes, insanity, sex, politics, crime, profanity, etc. As a result, we sometimes use *escort* for *prostitute*, *sanitation worker* for *garbage man*, *she is in the family way* for *she is pregnant*, *put to sleep* for *euthanize*, etc. Crystal (1995) provides the following euphemisms which comprise several of the above-mentioned concepts:

<i>ill</i>	<i>under the weather</i>
<i>the ultimate sacrifice</i>	<i>be killed</i>
<i>coffin</i>	<i>casket</i>
<i>cancer</i>	<i>after a long illness</i>
<i>die</i>	<i>fall asleep</i>
<i>be dead</i>	<i>push up the daises</i>
<i>mentally subnormal</i>	<i>not all there</i>
<i>toilet</i>	<i>little girl’s room</i>
<i>sack</i>	<i>let you go</i>
<i>lie</i>	<i>be economical with the truth</i>
<i>urinate</i>	<i>spend a penny</i>
<i>strike</i>	<i>industrial action</i>
<i>pregnant</i>	<i>in the family way</i>
<i>spit</i>	<i>expectorate</i>
<i>drunk</i>	<i>tired and emotional</i>
<i>naked</i>	<i>in one’s birthday suit</i>
<i>Christ</i>	<i>crikey</i>
<i>brothel</i>	<i>massage parlor</i>
<i>bribe</i>	<i>consideration</i>

Synonymy is abundant in a number of specific words which attract a great number of euphemisms, thus extending the lexical choice of the language user:

1.Lavatory

powder room, washroom, restroom, retiring room, (public) comfort station, ladies' (room), gentlemen's (room), water-closet, w.c., public conveniences, Windsor castle

2.Pregnant

in an interesting condition, in a delicate condition, in the family way, with a baby coming, (big) with child, expecting

3.Drunk

intoxicated, under the influence, tipsy, mellow, fresh, high, merry, flustered, overcome, full, drunk as a lord, drunk as an owl, boiled, fried, tanked, tight, stiff, pickled, soaked, three sheets to the wind, high as a kite, half-seas-over, tired and over emotional,

4.Devil

the Prince of Darkness, the black one, the evil one, dickens, deuce, (Old) Nick

5.To die

to pass away, to be taken, to breathe one's last, to depart this life, to close one's eyes, to yield (give) up the ghost, to go the way of all flesh, to go West, to kick off, to check out, to kick the bucket, to take a ride, to hop the twig, to join the majority, to go the way of all flesh, cash in your chips, drop off the perch, fall asleep, go down for the third time, go over to the other side, meet your maker, shuffle off to buffalo, turn up your toes,

6.Fat

Big boned, ample proportions, broad in the beam, full figured, well fed,

Similarly, Albanian provides numerous euphemisms for certain words:

1.Djali(Eng.: devil): qoftëlargu, ipaudhi, ipaqëni, ipapjesë, paemër, mospastëpjesë, ipadukur, I pagojë, plotgojë, hajujk, punëkeq, tartakut, brijanac, shqofto, largkëtej

2.Vdes: (Eng.: die): mbaroj, ftohem, shuhem, iki, shqimem, fikem, e ndjenperëndia, lëshëndenë, ndejkëmbën

3.Epilepsi (Eng.: epilepsy): ajo e tokës, ajo e fëmijëve, e mirë, e keqe, e ligë, punëherë, tërëndë, lodër, e leshtë, botë, havale, ajo e hënës, lëngatë e hënës, punë e hënës, punë e herës, punë e truallit, bëtaj

Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that the great number of euphemisms for a single word (or synonym) does not necessarily mean that the verbal repertoire of the language user comprises all of the euphemistic expressions. In many cases, euphemisms pertain to a specific dialectal variation, with one euphemism, for example, mainly used in North America and the other/s in England. One such example of dialectal and euphemistic variation is the word *toilet*, with some of the euphemisms used chiefly in North American English (*restroom*, *comfortstation*, and *washroom*).

In many cases, euphemisms emerge as scientific terms, which are less popular and less offending. This is evident in the following pairs of synonyms, with the second member of the pair being devoid of negative or unpleasant connotations: *drunkenness - intoxication*, *sweat - perspiration*. This phenomenon is common in the field of medicine where technical terms replace words which have gained negative connotations in everyday use. Consequently, a great number of synonymic sets are created in language, with members of the sets sharing a common denotation, or “Lyons (1995) descriptive meaning” but differing in their “Cruse (1986) peripheral traits”.

It must be pointed out that euphemisms can be studied within a synchronic level as both expressions, the euphemistic one (positive synonym) and the direct one (negative synonym) coexist in language and create a lexical opposition. Therefore, the diachronic aspect is essential for the analysis and consideration of euphemistic synonyms in terms of usage and validity. Language constantly evolves and so does society, historical, political, economic or religious circumstances. Moreover, change is an inevitable occurrence in the attitudes of people or society towards certain words or concepts.

What may have been considered embarrassing, offensive or taboo at a certain time in the past may now be devoid of such connotations. For example, English language users do not (generally) identify any unpleasant connotations in the word *trousers*. It simply means “Hornby (2000) a piece of clothing that covers the body from the waist down and is divided into two parts to cover each leg separately.” However, the word *trousers* used to have a relatively great number of euphemisms of funny or pleasant semantic shades. According to “Stefanllari (2011), the word *trousers* had the following euphemisms: *unmentionables*, *inexpressibles*, *indescribables*, *unwhisperables*, *you mustn't mention 'ems*, *sit-upons*.” This does not necessarily mean that the same evolutionary process has occurred in all languages for the same word because societies all over the world still have varied attitudes towards the very same object, action or phenomenon.

The same opinion is shared by Kostallari (1972) when analyzing euphemisms in Albanian language. He states that “such words as *dhelpër* (*fox*), *nuselalë* (*weasel*) etc. must not be considered euphemisms, although they were so originally.” Just like the English word *trousers*, these words have performed their intended function at the time of their coinage and have now become an integral part of the language vocabulary as neutral words.

This feature of euphemism is also evident in such examples as *goodness – for goodness sake! Goodness gracious! Goodness knows!* (with reference to the word *God*); *deuce*, *Old Nick*, etc. (with reference to the word *devil*).

While certain words do not need euphemisms any more, new words/concepts acquire euphemisms, which will in turn take the test of time and be in language as euphemisms until the people/society consider them so. Therefore, euphemism is a universal linguistic phenomenon, both in terms of geography and time.

In addition to the traditional spheres of euphemism (death, religion, bodily functions, sex, disease, etc.), a considerable number of synonyms have been emerging from such fields as politics, business and war. Here is a list of euphemisms commonly used nowadays to make their synonyms (or expressions) more acceptable and pleasant.

Area denial munitions: landmines

Redundancy: downsizing, rationalization, restructuring, slimming down

Potential sale: strategic alternatives

Mass expulsion or extermination of ethnic minorities: ethnic cleansing

Accidental destruction of non-military areas: collateral damage

Killing of soldiers on one's own side: friendly fire

Handing over terrorist suspects for interrogation and possible torture: extraordinary rendition

Fire someone: career change opportunity, repositioning, streamlining

Violent entertainment: action entertainment

Physical persuasion: torture

Operational exhaustion: shell shock

The search for what is regarded as correct language has produced a number of synonymous expressions of euphemistic nature. The primary goal of this search is to avoid prejudice, discrimination or offence. Such examples include: *Afro-American* instead of *Negro* or *Black*, *Native American* instead of *Indian*, *mail carrier* instead of *mailman*, etc. The euphemistic expression thus serves to eliminate the historically accumulated negative connotations in terms of race, ethnicity and gender. Whether such use of linguistic expressions is more correct is debatable because the endeavor to find another word to replace an inherently neutral word, for example *Indian*, may still imply prejudice for some.

To conclude, it must be highlighted that euphemism is a mere reflection of the societal circumstances at a certain period of time. It is part of the evolutionary process of all natural languages, where old words go out of use or undergo semantic changes and new words emerge in language. The coexistence of old and newly formed words produces interesting lexical oppositions, such as the euphemistic synonymous opposition, where one member of the set (the euphemism) is intended to be less offensive, less direct, less embarrassing, or more pleasant and correct.

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