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Euphemism as a Word-Formation Process

Introduction

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Introduction

The English word “euphemism” can be traced back for the first time in a book written in 1656 by Thomas Blount, *Glossographia* [Burchfield 1985: 13], and comes from Greek *euphèmos*, which is itself derived from the adjective *euphèmos*, “of good omen” (from *eu*, “good”, and *phèmi*, “I say”). A euphemism consists in replacing the original signifier, perceived as being offensive or unpleasant, by another one; it is often referred to as a “veil” or a “shroud” thrown over the signified, as if to conceal it.

Yet, euphemism is not a mere linguistic device, but participates in a larger, more general phenomenon used by speakers to soften the potentially offensive effects of a taboo area to preserve social harmony in communication and to avoid any face-threatening acts¹. Euphemism can be seen as a “deodorizing spray and perfume” [Allan & Burridge 1991: 25], and euphemistic language as a “‘deodorizing’ language” [Allan & Burridge 1985: 25], to avoid mentioning a given taboo. But euphemism is not the only way of dealing with taboos, as taboo can be avoided through another means: by using dysphemisms. Indeed, according to Allan & Burridge [1991: 7], euphemisms and dysphemisms are “obverse sides of the same coin” which “do not form clear-cut categories” [Crespo Fernández 2007: 15]:

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 offence, that of the audience, or some third party. [Allan & Burridge 1991: 11]

A **dysphemism** is an expression with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum or to the audience, or both, and it is substituted for a neutral or euphemistic expression for just that reason. [Allan & Burridge 1991: 26]

When thinking about “euphemism”, the layman is bound to come up with comments such as: “it is a nice way to put things politely without offending the person you’re talking to”, “it has to do with style, good manners and politeness”, “it is a poetical device”, etc. Yet in this issue, we consider that euphemism cannot be simply restricted to a mere stylistic, or even lexical device, but needs to be considered as an everyday, comprehensive phenomenon, a form of “verbal behavior” [Crespo Fernández 2005: 78] which serves a specific, *functional* purpose in social discourse [Fairclough 2008]. Indeed, euphemism is not just a matter of pure lexical choice – i.e. elegant stylistic variation, a sort of “linguistic makeup” [Crespo Fernández 2005: 79] – but a real choice made by the speaker in a given discursive context. As Allan & Burridge [1991: 4] write:

[E]uphemism and dysphemism are principally determined by the choice of expression within a given context: both world spoken **of**, and the world spoken **in**.

The articles in this volume aim to discuss the creativity of euphemism as a word-formation process and to show that – whether on a temporary or a more permanent basis – euphemism and dysphemism play a significant role in word-formation processes in any language.

The volume opens with an article by **Keith Allan**, “X-phemism and Creativity”, in which the author shows how X-phemism – i.e. euphemism and its corollary dysphemism – motivates language change through creativity. In “The Expressive Creativity of

¹ The notion of “face” is borrowed from Goffman.

Euphemism and Dysphemism", **Miguel Casas Gómez** follows the path opened by Keith Allan and tackles the expressiveness of euphemism and dysphemism, showing that the dividing line between taboo and dysphemism is, on occasions, quite blurred, and that, consequently, the boundary between euphemism and dysphemism is not entirely clear. **Kate Burridge** in "Euphemism and Language Change: The Sixth and Seventh Ages" reviews the various communicative functions of euphemisms and the different linguistic strategies that are used in their creation, focusing on the linguistic creativity that surrounds the topic of "old age" in Modern English as well as the ancient and modern perspective of naming. In "*Frequent flyer* – La reformulation euphémistique dans le discours sur l'événement", **Charlotte Danino** proposes to study a particular case of rephrasing during the September 11 terrorist attacks: the set phrase *frequent flyer*, which becomes *frequent traveller*, can be considered as an example of euphemism created on the spur of the moment. In "Lexical Creation and Euphemism: Regarding the Distinction *Denominative or Referential Neology* vs. *Stylistic or Expressive Neology*", **María Tadea Díaz Hormingo** shows that the distinction between denominative or referential neology and stylistic or expressive neology is insufficient, and accounts for some of the motivations upon which euphemistic creations are based. **Chris Smith** in "Double whammy! The dysphemistic euphemism implied in *unVables* such as *unmentionables*, *unprintables*, *undesirables*" presents a case study of *unVables*; by producing a list of attested *unVables*, the author investigates the correlation between lexical complexity, lexical creativity and euphemism. In "The Translatability of Euphemism and Dysphemism in Arabic-English Subtitling", **Mohammad Ahmad Thawabteh** focuses on the translatability of Arabic amelioration and pejoration in English subtitling, illustrated with a subtitled Egyptian film, and examines the nature of euphemism and dysphemism, both concepts being approached from the perspective of technical and translation paradigms. Finally, **Alexandra Bagasheva** in "The tastes and distastes of verbivores – some observations on X-phemisation in Bulgarian and English" aims to elaborate on a hypothesis of X-phemisation via lexical extension as involving the mechanism of nominal metaphor at the conceptual level, both in English and Bulgarian.

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