

# EUPHEMISMS IN AMERICAN CULTURE: INDIRECT LANGUAGE WITH A PURPOSE

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Every language provides users with a wide variety of word choices to express their ideas. Some of the words that people choose, however, may be used to convey certain nuances or changes in meaning that obscure communication rather than facilitate it. Such is the case with *euphemisms*, a class of words and phrases that present special problems for non-native speakers of any language. In American culture, euphemisms are used for a wide variety of purposes. As a language tool and political strategy, the simple euphemism can assist in achieving a wide range of goals, from softening the blow of some unpleasant concept to concealing the horror of some reality.

Simply defined, a euphemism is an indirect or mild term or phrase in place of one that may be considered harsh, offensive, or blunt. People using this device substitute a pretty word for a harsh one, a process that is often called sugarcoating--literally coating something considered undesirable with sugar. Although most people first think of the pervasive use of euphemisms in American culture as an offshoot of cultural puritanism, even a brief examination of the wide range of uses shows that this device goes far beyond any puritanical purpose. In the real world, euphemisms are used to conceal certain truths or to obscure reality in such a way that may make the ideas that they stand for more acceptable socially, politically, emotionally, or psychologically.

Essentially, euphemisms are pleasant or socially acceptable words or expressions that replace ugly or offensive ones. They soften the blow of harsh words. In America, mothers sometimes warn their children that they will "tickle their behinds" if they don't stop acting up. They really mean "spank" "beat" or "whip" them. Polite society commonly uses euphemistic terms to describe "unmentionables" such as *powder room* or *bathroom* for toilet, *pass away* for die, *mentally challenged* for *lacking in intelligence*, and *recovering substance abuser* for *drunk*. In his book *Language in Thought and Action*, S.I. Hayakawa describes words that soften ideas as "purr-words." He says that these words "are chosen for the pleasant, positive judgments or evaluations they convey rather than for the things they refer to in objective terms (p. 89)." As these examples and others demonstrate, euphemisms are chosen for the emotional affect that they produce on others more so than for their meanings--in other words for their selective connotations rather than their dictionary definitions, their denotations. For example, the official phrase used by the U.S. Government for spraying napalm in Viet Nam, *selective chemical insertion*, really conveys no particular meaning in itself. The military coined this term, no doubt, to conceal the reality of spraying human beings with a deadly poison. Out of context, most people will not understand the intended meaning. This obscure phrase was selected by the U.S.

Military, obviously, for its lack of clear meaning--it conveys no real connotations. Let's now move on to the various purposes behind euphemisms.

## TO CREATE HUMOR

Sometimes, replacing an ugly word with a pretty euphemism can generate considerable humor and may even border on the wise-crack--or may even be regarded as objectionable as the original. For example, a "big butt" gets transformed into *secretary spread*, a "short person" becomes *vertically challenged*, a "fat person," *horizontally enhanced*, and a "cheapskate," *economically inclined*. A person who "lies" and falsifies the facts is described as *a sufferer from fictitious disorder syndrome*. Years ago, the door leading to the men's toilet on the Am Track read "Gentlemen's lounge Facility," a humorous euphemism that bears little resemblance to the function of the room. Similarly, with the advent of fake woods, some companies were advertising their products as being made from "genuine simulated mahogany," a claim that uses genuinely confusing phrasing in the form of a contradiction in terms. The word simulated means not real. So how can something be genuine and simulated at the same time? The answer is simple: the mahogany is fake, but it is nonetheless the real thing in the class of artificial mahoganies as opposed to genuine mahoganies..

## TO AVOID HARSH REALITIES

Moreover, in addition to softening harsh expressions, euphemisms also serve to muddle issues and avoid the realities often suggested by negatively-charged terminology like *kill or murder*. An ad for weed killer--a herbicide--is called a "Turf Builder," and the controversial "radiation" of our food is euphemistically called "cold pasteurization," a phrase that conveys a positive image in comparison to those suggested by radiating something to death. These practices are particularly deceptive when positive terms are used to describe something that we all know is bad, dangerous, or unfair. In the film *China Syndrome*, a potentially disastrous nuclear accident is called "an involuntary transient" "an involuntary transient" by the officials operating the nuclear plant.

At other times, the terms are designed to minimize the uproar over what may be considered unfair practices or discrimination. When "laying off" thousands of people, companies often use complex and confusing words such as *right-sizing*, *reconstructing the company*, *condensing the workforce*, or *downsizing*. When the government has to bail some companies out of bankruptcy, they sometimes refer to the process as debt consolidation or financial redistribution--a fancy way of saying that they are distributing our tax dollars to private enterprise. In one scandal, a union leader who was caught diverting union funds into a slush account used for private parties, tours to Europe, and extravagant entertaining, referred to the felonious embezzlement of union money as "spending irregularities" when the scandal came to light.

## TO MINIMIZE SOCIAL ALARM

Euphemisms also serve to calm issues down in order to avoid unnecessary conflict, unwanted publicity, or sensationalism. Hospitals sometimes use "negative patient care outcome" for the patient died. In front of children, "obscene language" and "dirty words" become adult language. During the search for bin Laden and other terrorists, U.S. soldiers captured an American among a group of suspected Al Queeda members. Not wanting to classify an American (John Lindh) as a "terrorist" until they had more details, they invented the euphemism of "illegal combatant," a much softer yet totally unclear label. After the Afghan war in 2003, political wizards had to dream up new terms to avoid giving an accurate impression of what they were up to. When human rights groups expressed concern whether or not the Afghan captives were being treated according to the rules established by the Geneva Convention amidst the controversy that they were shackled like wild animals and incarcerated in cages, American military announced that the captives were not prisoners of war but "battlefield detainees," for which there are no guidelines.

## TO DISTORT FACTS

Euphemisms also become deceptive when they are used to conceal important facts or change the meaning of crucial words and concepts. For example, a witness who commits perjury is described as having merely "misconstrued the facts." This kind of deceptive restatement of common ideas forms the basis of what is known as bureaucratic double speak, a term that refers to covering up the images created by the reality or horror of regular language. No doubt, the world's militaries have coined thousands and thousands of euphemisms to conceal certain realities. The genocide of an entire race is called *ethnic cleansing*; "bombing" becomes *protective reaction strike*; bombs that miss their targets, *incontinent ordinance*; the accidental killing of members of the same military, *friendly fire*, and the use of napalm as *selected chemical insertion*. At one time in Uganda, a murder squad was referred to as *a public safety unit*.

Some euphemisms are occasionally elevated to the level of artistic witticisms. In the Vietnam war film *Apocalypse Now*, U.S. military officials use a euphemism to inform Captain Williard that his mission is essentially to kill Colonel Kurtz. The general's aid tells him to "terminate the Colonel's command." When Williard indicates that he does not clearly understand the order, another aid tells him to "terminate with extreme prejudice." Notice that the first use of terminate does not take a human object--not specifically to terminate the Colonel but terminate his command. Curiously, the phrase terminate with extreme prejudice has become a common and popular expression to infer kill without mercy. In fact, Walter Hill used a variation of this phrase *Extreme Prejudice* as the title of a movie in 1987. Other variations of this phrase are often used also in other films and dramas with a variety of meanings:

*destroy with extreme prejudice, attack with extreme prejudice, retaliate with extreme prejudice, revenge with extreme prejudice*, and so on. This example shows the important role of euphemisms in the language games we all play.

## TO SOFTEN HORRORS OF REALITY

Finally, euphemisms are also used to conceal the horror of certain realities. Comedian George Carlin in his sometimes-not-so-funny comedy explains that governments and militaries depend on euphemisms to conceal what they are really up to. He offers the example of the term *shell shocked*, which refers to the emotional and psychological condition that a soldier experiences as a result of severe bombardment. The combination of the term shell and shocked convey a strong image of a person being jolted, staggered, or traumatized by the rumble and thunder made by detonating explosives--in fact you can almost hear bombs exploding as you say the words. As a consequence, the department of defense changed the term to several softer words: *battle disorientation, combat fatigue*, and, finally, *post-traumatic stress disorder*. Horrible acts get softened by this device. Hitler's plan to kill off all the Jewish people on the planet was officially called "the final solution." These examples clearly illustrate the way that ordinary, common words can be distorted to convey an entirely different meaning and reality.

As we have seen, euphemisms can be used for a wide variety of purposes. They have both a positive and negative face. On the one hand, they assist in expressing bad news and elicit less of a reaction from the audience than do harsher words. But they can also be used to trick and deceive--horrible acts are covered up through the use of neutral terms or pretty words.