

HIDING BEHIND NICE WORDS: THE USE OF EUPHEMISMS IN MASS-MEDIA DISCOURSE

Alina Roşcan

Lecturer, PhD, Carol I National Defense University, Bucharest

Abstract: Throughout the ages, there has been great interest in determining how people influence one another via language. There has been talk of the power of words, of their beneficial or negative effects and, in an attempt to produce political correctness when communicating with others, the agents of influence have adopted all sorts of euphemisms – vague or indirect words and phrases which are used instead of vocabulary that may seem either offensive or overtly blunt. But what happens when the speaker resorts too often to euphemisms in mass-media discourse? This paper investigates the way in which individuals are influenced by this combination of obscuring phrases and mass-media features.

Keywords: euphemism, deception, mass-media, influence

There have so far been five major communicative inventions which have profoundly and definitively influenced human interaction and evolution. These are the spoken word, the written word, the printed word, the electronic word and the interactive word. Each of them has had its specific consequences such as socializing, literacy, the spread of knowledge, the broadcast of information from few to many receivers, a decrease in the critical investigation of the mass-media content as in most cases people process electronic information only peripherally. The fact that ‘word’ underlies all of these inventions speaks volumes and if we take into consideration that ‘in the beginning was the Word’ (John 1:1) and creation was brought about by the uttering of words, then we can infer that there is power in words. It is also reasonable to assume that words which were used for creation were subsequently followed by words which could be considered destructive, offensive, harsh, and even dirty. To counter their negative potential, individuals started to use euphemisms. This paper looks into the partnership between euphemisms and mass-media and tries to identify the effects upon the receivers of media products. In order to do so, it briefly looks into the features of euphemisms as well as into the influence exercised by mass-media.

Euphemisms and Influence

If we use the Online Etymology Dictionary to trace back the origins of the word *euphemism*, we discover Greek and Proto Indo European roots, i.e. *euphemizein* made up of *eu-* meaning *good, well* and *pheme* meaning *speech, voice, utterance, speaking*, derived from *phanai* meaning *speak* (from the PIE root **bha-* meaning *to speak, tell, say*). The dictionary further explains that the recourse to euphemisms was intended as a way of avoiding words perceived as inauspicious, and constituted therefore a way of replacing these with fair words of good omen. Early examples of the recourse to euphemisms appear in Photius’s *Bibliotheca* where he quotes Helladius of Antinoopolis of the 4th century AD: ‘All the ancients, but most of all the Athenians,

were careful not to use ill-omened words; so they called the prison “the chamber,” and the executioner “the public man,” and the Furies (Erinyes) they called “Eumenides” (“the kindly ones”) or “the Venerable Goddesses” (Frazer 212:365).

Euphemisms are not bound to a single language, nor are they limited to a specific era. A quick survey of several of the major languages of the world reveals their widespread use: in French ‘une longue maladie’ is preferred to ‘cancer’ and ‘les personnes du troisième âge’ is used instead of ‘the old’; in Italian ‘passare a miglior vita’ stands for ‘dying’ and ‘qualcosa lascia a desiderare’ is meant to avoid saying that something is repulsive; in Spanish ‘institución correccional’ means in fact ‘jail, prison’ and ‘pasado de copas’ replaces the more direct ‘drunk’; in German ‘unbeschäftigt’ is a nicer way of saying ‘unemployed’ and ‘negatives wachstum’ means in fact ‘loss, decrease’; in Russian ‘поддержка с воздуха’ means ‘air support’ and sounds more pleasant and helpful than ‘bombing’ or ‘strafing’ and ‘или дружественным огнем’ hides the act of gross negligence which involves firing at colleagues and partners.

As far as the timeline is concerned, euphemisms appear throughout the ages as early as the above Greek examples of the 4th century and crisscross the eras up to present, as the following examples aim to show: appearing in the 13th century, ‘doing’ meant ‘copulating’; in mid-15th century ‘jakes’ substituted ‘a privy’; in the 1660s ‘fertilizer’ was preferred to ‘manure’; in the 1780s the interjections ‘dang’ and ‘darn’ were used instead of ‘damn’; in the 19th century ‘blazes’ started to stand in for ‘hell’; in the 20th century ‘pre-owned’ or ‘landfill’ replaced ‘used’ and respectively ‘dumpsite’; and finally, in the 21st century ‘inflammatory language’ and ‘full and frank discussions’ replaced ‘hate language’ and ‘arguments’, respectively.

At first, people resorted to euphemisms perhaps out of superstition that inauspicious words might bring about unfavorable outcomes – a practice relatively recently outlined in JK Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series in which Lord Valdermort’s name is taboo and reference to him is done via euphemistic phrases such as ‘He who must not be named’, ‘the Prince of Darkness’ and ‘You-Know-Who’ reminiscent of people’s reluctance to use the word ‘devil’. Nowadays people prefer euphemisms when they feel that a word or phrase may be perceived as offensive or unpleasant, and by softening their wording, by using roundabout expressions, they avoid stirring unwanted emotions. At this point, euphemisms join forces with the contemporary practice of ‘political correctness’. Both wording strategies aim at doing away with unpleasantness, although politically-correct terms and phrases tend to focus on issues pertaining to discrimination.

The use of euphemisms is not restricted to only a domain of our life, as they rather appear in almost every area; however, this paper looks into some of the euphemisms related to the military and to politics, such as ‘friendly fire’, ‘collateral damage’, ‘nuclear deterrent’, ‘soft target’, ‘incursion’, ‘transfer tubes’, ‘take out/down’, ‘kick butt’, ‘asymmetric warfare’, ‘aerial ordinance’, ‘enhanced interrogation’, ‘insurgent’, ‘theatre of operations’, ‘strategic withdrawal’, ‘push-button war’, ‘Chernobyl accident’, ‘assets’, ‘surgical strikes’. The choice for these two areas is determined by the fact that the media pay close attention to them and therefore news about political and military developments figure prominently.

The really thorny issue arises when euphemisms are used in a dishonest manner, with the purpose of deceiving individuals, of concealing reality. Such misleading euphemisms ‘sanitize and camouflage actions, things or events that could appear unacceptable in the light of professed values’ (Mayfield 2009: 270). When the recourse to euphemisms is meant to mislead, it becomes

similar to *doublespeak*, a term which Orwell coined in his dystopia *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to describe the deliberate distortions and reversals of word meaning. In his novel, doublespeak is used in order to make the bad seem good, the guilty guiltless, the unreasonable reasonable. Thus, misleading euphemisms obscure meaning rather than enhance it.

Often they are deliberately used in political discourse in order to justify controversial measures or incidents which could damage the image of the politician if left unchecked. Using such rhetorical devices may generate ambiguity which could prevent individuals from accurately decoding the discourse. On April 12, 1986, a reactor from a nuclear power plant blew up radioactively contaminating the environment in the area as well as in neighbouring countries; 47 workers died, a plethora of cancers ensued, mutations occurred and still do, to name just a few of the consequences of the blow-up; and yet people no longer refer to it as a catastrophe, but prefer the much toned-down 'Chernobyl accident' which denotes just lack of intention and possible damage to something or injury to someone. Such a euphemistic phase prevents individuals from grasping the full extent of the occurrence.

Many political decisions related to military actions are justified by means of euphemisms. It would never do to call death by its name and have dead soldiers return home in body bags, so politicians use instead 'transfer tubes'. Neither would they benefit from admitting that their own government condones torture, so instead they talk about 'enhanced interrogation' techniques. The fact that troops are sent to theatres of operation has nothing to do with the images conjured up by a theatres and operations, and yet the phrase is preferable. An incursion might be more readily accepted by the electors than a hostile entrance into or invasion of a place or territory.

Mass-Media and Influence

Mass communication designates the social process through which a specialized group collects, processes, produces and broadcasts unremittingly messages towards a heterogeneous large public, via some technical channels in a competitive regime and according to a set of norms (Petcu 2002:37). Whatever the form, newspapers, magazines, radio, television or on-line publishing, mass-media represent means via which individuals receive mass-communication messages and are influenced to think or act in a certain manner. Mass-media answer some of the needs of the receivers, such as the need to be informed, the need to evade, the need to fit socially, etc. When answering these needs, the media exercise influence.

When informing, mass-media supply useful information, such as the weather forecast, natural phenomena in the spatial-temporal proximity, stock exchange developments, road and traffic conditions, cultural, political sports events, etc. They also furnish general information, scientific discoveries, legislative initiatives, the activities of public institutions, information which does not decisively influence the decisions of the receivers, but does contribute to the forming of ideas, to the strengthening or weakening of beliefs. Another type of information provided by the media guides the receiver in her/his choices and is connected to shows, cultural and sports events, public statements of local authorities, etc. Finally, the warning information aims at drawing the attention of the receivers to potential risks whether these are related to weather phenomena, agriculture or industry forecast, the outbreak of infections or epidemics, the looming threat of terrorism, and others.

However, all these notices and pieces of information have a highly persuasive character and influencing potential generated by the selection process. Social reality brims over with informational events; still, the human capacity for receiving remains practically constant, a fact which demands the selection of the events that are to be 'injected' into the informational reality, in the informing processes. Without a doubt, this selection is invariably done according to some criteria which determine the events and information to be discarded or to be kept. The result will be different from the event reality; it will be a selective one in which reality will be reflected according to the criteria applied for selection. In conclusion, the consumers of media products are already influenced because of the mere selection of events and information. This form of influence could be deemed objective, yet it remains intentional. It is objective because it is impossible to reflect all the events and it is intentional because it depends on the criteria used when the selection is made.

The interpreting function refers to the ordering of social reality and to the clarifications which mass-media proffer, bestowing meaning or confirming or refuting the receptor's own interpretations or those of other sources, by means of the editorial, the commentary, the pamphlet, the chronicle, the caricature (for the written or on-line press), the interventions, the stand-ups, the talk shows, the interviews (for radio or television). This interpretation presupposes the intervention of the media actor in the rendering of events, facts, situations, occurrences, and this interpretation is meant to 'facilitate understanding', to predetermine meaning, to orient significations, to arrange the meanings for the final consumer. The interpretation manages to influence and to persuade because always media actors, authors, opinion leaders and formers, and media analysts benefit from the aura of authority conferred to them by the consumers. The public follows opinion formers, media actors, because they are (or at least they give the impression that they are) in direct contact with the events, the occurrences or the situations which they interpret. If this authority ascendancy, springing from the direct relationship with the event, is coupled with a possible authority of the displayed competence, the persuasive and influencing force of the interpretation of events is very intense with the public. Furthermore, if these two are supplemented by the public authority, for the media actor is a person with a status and a social role recognized and accepted by the public, then the influencing force becomes overwhelming.

Through the entertainment function, whether this means movies or plays, music or dancing, sports competitions or cartoons, media products disconnect receivers from daily activities, providing them with cathartic experiences, bestirring pleasure, making up for the inescapable quotidian dissatisfactions or constituting a reward. Consequently, media entertainment becomes a form of social therapy in the mass culture (Deac 2003: 44). Media entertainment products challenge the public, the consumers to represent, to imagine, to project a sort of 'fictional' reality, nonetheless a reality where there are elements and values desirable or undesirable in the actual world. Thus, through mass-culture products, through entertainment and reward, models and ideas are inoculated, values and ideologies are inculcated. A quick summing-up of media products for entertainment can reveal that many realities fictional in their time became reality not long after. Science fiction literature and lore turn out to be the vectors which influence and model the horizon of the future reality. Consequently, it becomes clear that they have a capacity for influence and persuasion, in a very subtle, rarely detectable manner.

In conclusion, the partnership between euphemisms and mass-media has great potential for influence. Receivers of media content are twice subjected to influence – once via the very functions of mass-media, and at the same, via the choice of words selected in the media content. Whenever euphemisms are meant to deceive by clouding social reality, they represent a danger. Such wordings efface the hard truths, as it happens when ‘collateral damage’ obscures the fact that non-combatants, women, children and the old are killed in military actions. The euphemistic phrase does not conjure up the image of splayed, mutilated bodies of civilians; it does not convey the same amount of drama, as would a vivid and accurate description of the situation. At the same time, euphemisms engender a sense that things are in order, that there is nothing wrong, inappropriate, damnable or shameful. Constant repetition of euphemistic words and phrases might even lull people into condoning courses of action which otherwise, if accurately called for what they are, would not have gained the support of the populous. These dangers are exacerbated by the fact that the media circulate and spread euphemisms reaching large numbers of individuals and, at the same time, because there is little feedback, the flow of information being in most cases unidirectional.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Asan, Doina. „The Correctness of Political Correctness”. *Strategii XXI*. 3/2017: 61-64.
- Chelcea, S. (2006). *Opinia publică. Strategii de persuasiune și manipulare*. București: Editura Economică.
- Coșeriu, Eugen. (2009). *Omul și limbajul său*. Ed. Univ. Alex. Ioan Cuza Iași.
- Deac, I. P. (2003). *Introducere în sistemul mass-media*. București: Editura Universității Naționale de Apărare „Carol I”.
- Frazer, J.G ed. *Pausanias's Description of Greece*. vol 2, translated by Frazer, J.G Cambridge Univ. Press: New York, 2012.
- Hartley, J. (1999). *Discursul știrilor*. (M. Mitarcă, Trans.) București: Polirom.
- Hojati, Alireza. ”A Study of Euphemisms in the Context of English-speaking Media”. *International Journal of Linguistics*. 4/2012: 552-562.
- Larson, C. (2007). *Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility* (12 ed.). Boston: Wadsworth.
- Mayfield, M. (2010). *Thinking for Yourself: Developing Critical Thinking Through Reading and Writing* (8th ed.). Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Muscan, Maria. „Eufemismul politic”. *Ovidius University Annals of Philology*. XV/2004: 129-141.
- Online Etymology Dictionary*. 'euphemism'.

Douglas Harper. 26.11.2017. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/euphemism>

Petcu, Marian. (2002). *Sociologia mass media*. Cluj-Napoca: Editura Dacia.

Ryabova, Mariana. „Euphemisms and media framing”. *European Scientific Journal*, 32/2013: 33-44.

Zafiu, Rodica. (2007). *Limba și politică*. Ed. Univ. București.