A Study of Euphemisms in the Context of English-speaking Media

Alireza Hojati

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Amin Higher Education Institution, P.O. Box 81688-44811, District A2, Unit 20, Fouladshar, Isfahan, Iran

Tel: 98-031-1668-5584   E-mail: harries.alireza@gmail.com

Abstract

Euphemisms are frequently used by speakers of different languages to soften the impact of concepts with the potential to cause offence and social disapproval. Today, the use of euphemisms has increased by the media and new and controversial euphemism have also been born. Bearing these points in mind, this study was carried out with the aim of eliciting and qualitatively examining a number of high-frequency euphemisms employed by English-speaking media. To this end, three high-profile media were selected and their news bulletins were recorded for a three-month-long period. The calculation of frequencies of different euphemisms used by the media organizations revealed that poverty- and military-related euphemism figured prominently in the news bulletins, while euphemisms dealing with economy, disability, death and sex had lower frequencies of use. The qualitative analysis of data revealed insightful points, not least the influence of current and ongoing affairs on the use of euphemisms and the involvement of other non-linguistic factors on media discourse featuring euphemisms.

Keywords: Euphemism, Media

1. Introduction

1.1 Definition of the Term

The word '*euphemism*' has been succinctly defined by online Merriam-Webster Dictionary as "the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant" (2012). The examination of the word's etymology reveals that it is originally a Greek word with two parts, viz. "eu", which means "good", and "pheme", which means "speaking"(Online Etymology Dictionary(2012)).

1.2 Use of Euphemisms

Euphemisms can be found in most of the world's languages and fulfill certain important functions in them. One of the most significant functions of euphemisms, according to Pavlenko(2006), is "to protect speakers from undesired emotional arousal"(p.260). Commenting on this function, Miller (1999) has pointed out that given the existence of concepts deemed too offensive to speak about in almost all the world's languages, there exists a need for speakers of different languages to find roundabout, indirect and socially acceptable ways of referring to such concepts. According to him, euphemisms can fulfill this important function by sanitizing the language which the speakers use. Echoing this view, Mayfield (2009) has noted that euphemisms "sanitize and camouflage actions, things, or events that could appear unacceptable in light of professed values" (p.270). Further, Lim(2012) has indicated that euphemisms are commonly used in people's daily speech and fulfill two functions in it, namely, toning done the nature of potentially offensive things which people need to mention and speak about, and neutralizing negative connotations associated with offensive entities.

There are many offensive and unmentionable things which euphemisms refer to. Death, war, intercourse, bodily functions and disability are some of the concepts to which euphemisms routinely refer (Stockwell (2002), Brind & Wilkinson(2008)).

1.3 Euphemisms and Deception

Although the use of euphemisms for making unmentionable concepts mentionable and less offensive is generally considered a good and acceptable thing, there are serious objections to the use of such terms because they can also be used for deceiving people (Jackall (2009), Soles (2009)). In this connection, Lacone (2003) has commented that "euphemisms can also hide seemingly simple and straightforward words behind deceptive or overly complex ones" (p.60). Further, LaRocque (2006), who focused on controversial aspects of some euphemisms, has noted that euphemisms which deal with political, military and commercial concepts can be particularly deceptive and controversial (2006). Safire(2008) has lent his support to this view and has added that apart from political, business and military euphemisms, environmental issues, which receive a lot of attention by both conservation groups and the mass media, have led to the birth of many euphemisms, many of which are misleading and highly debatable(2008).

Some examples of controversial and misleading euphemisms include Richard Nixon's use of '*plausible deniability*' to refer to 'deception' (Ford(2004)), the use of the word '*downsizing*' to refer to the act of laying off a substantial number of a company's workers or employees (Lacone (2003)), the use of the term '*collateral damage'* to denote civilian deaths in war situations (Sarioglu (2011)), the employment of the term '*extraordinary rendition'* to refer to "kidnapping followed by torture" (Trivers (2011)), and the use of the term '*enhanced interrogation*' to refer to torture (Nunberg (2009)).

1.4 Euphemisms, Media and Language Learners

The English-speaking media, including newspapers, magazines and satellite television and radio channels, routinely employ a large number of euphemisms (Mercer(2002), Coleman (2007), McArthur(2005)). Further, these media are becoming increasingly available to EFL/ ESL learners and are being increasingly used in different ESL/EFL settings for educational purposes (Chan, Chin & Nagami (2011)). As a result, today's EFL/ESL learners have a lot of exposure to different types of euphemisms, regardless of whether the devote particular attention to them or treat them as typical words. Besides, even discerning learners who devote special attention to euphemisms are very likely to have difficulty interpreting and making sense of them. In this regard, Roe, Burns & Smith (2011) have commented that euphemisms and figurative language pose significant problems for foreign language learners since they often lack the background knowledge needed for making sense of euphemisms and words used figuratively in different contexts.

Echoing the views of the above-mentioned authors, Hammond & Bransford (2012) have noted that euphemisms can pose problems such as confusion and failure to adequately interpret information not only for language learners, but also for language teachers. Given this, the authors have emphasized the need for preparing today's language teachers for coping with the many complexities of language-teaching, including those dealing with euphemisms, in a rapidly changing world with a rapidly changing language landscape (2012).

The most radical proposal in relation to euphemisms has been put forward on the website http://esl.yourdictionary.com/euphemism-lessons.html. According to an article entitled '*Euphemism Lessons'*, which is available on the foregoing website, there is a need to develop language lessons which focus exclusively on English euphemisms and adequately introduce them and important points surrounding them to non-native learners of English. According to this article, the design and development of such lessons can be one of the most beneficial ways of helping English language learners.

Bearing all of the above points in mind, there is a need for the devotion of more scholarly, research and pedagogical attention to commonly-used euphemisms in the English-speaking media.

2. Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study is to identify and examine frequently-used euphemisms featuring in English-speaking media. Bearing in mind the use of numerous euphemisms and euphemistic expressions by the many English-speaking media, the scope of the study is confined to news

bulletins of a limited number of high-profile English-speaking television channels during a fairly short period of time. Further, the study aims to come up with pedagogical points and recommendations associated with the findings.

3. Methodology

3.1 Materials

To collect the data needed for this study, the researcher used materials featuring in a number of 30-minute news bulletins of three internationally influential and reputable satellite television channels. The channels used were *BBC World News*, *AlJazeera English* and *France 24 English*.

3.2 Procedures

The researcher used a small recording device to record one 30-minute news bulletin from each of the foregoing news channels every other day for a three-month-long period between August 1th and November 1th, 2012. The news bulletins were selected on a random basis at different times of the day (early-morning, mid-morning, mid-day, early afternoon, evening, mid-night). Throughout the data-collection period, the researcher checked the voice quality of recorded materials to make sure what was being recorded was quite audible and suitable for the subsequent data-analysis procedures.

3.3 Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data collected from the news bulletins, the researcher first listened to each bulletin three times in order to identify euphemisms used in it by new casters, correspondents, analysts and commentators whose words featured in it. After the identification of all the euphemisms used, the researcher calculated their frequencies and subjected the most frequent ones to further analysis.

For the qualitative analysis of frequently-used euphemisms, the researcher consulted a number of books and online sources, especially the most recent ones, to explore the meanings, connotations and possible controversies surrounding the frequently-employed euphemisms.

4. Results

The following tables present the study's results.

Table 1.4. Military euphemisms used by the three news channels and frequencies of their use

Descriptive Statistics

Euphemism	Frequency of Use
Friendly fire	53
Collateral damage/deaths	62
Nuclear deterrent	56
Soft Target	68

Table 2.4. Economy-related euphemisms used by the three news channels and their frequencies

Descriptive Statistics

Euphemism	Frequency of Use
Between jobs	46
Downsizing	58
Negative growth	61

Table 3.4. Disability-related euphemisms used by the three news channels and their frequencies

Descriptive Statistics

Euphemism	Frequency of Use
People/Those with limited ability	14
Physically challenged person/s/people	31
…-impaired person/s/people	22

Table 4.4. Sex-related euphemisms used by the three news channels and their frequencies

Descriptive Statistics

Euphemism	Frequency of Use
Privates/Private parts	12
(Illicit) Affair	35
Liaison	14
Sleep together/with sb	11
F Word	9
C-word	7

Table5.4. Death-related euphemisms used by the three news channels and their frequencies

Descriptive Statistics

Euphemism	Frequency of Use
Pass away	32
Final resting place	27

Table 6.4. Poverty-related euphemisms used by the three news channels and their frequencies

Descriptive Statistics

Euphemism	Frequency of Use
Live in reduced circumstances	53
Financially challenged	57
Disadvantaged	72

Table 7.4. Summary table which summarizes frequencies of use of each category of Euphemisms

Descriptive Statistics

Category of Euphemisms	Total Frequency of Use
Military euphemisms	239
Economy-related euphemisms	165
Disability-related euphemisms	67
Sex-related euphemisms	88
Death-related euphemisms	59
Poverty-related euphemisms	182

5. Discussion and Conclusions

At the beginning of this section, the aims being pursued by this study ought to be repeated. As mentioned previously, the first aim of the current study was to identify frequently-used euphemisms employed by three high-profile international news channels. The second aim was to examine the most frequently-employed euphemisms qualitatively. Tables of the 'Results' section help determine which euphemisms have had high frequencies of use and which ones can be regarded as the most frequently-used euphemisms.

As table 1.4. shows, although all the four military euphemism had high frequencies of use, two of them, viz. '*soft target'* and '*collateral damage'* were used more frequently than others(68 and 62 respectively).

According to figures presented in table 2.4. '*negative growth'* had the highest frequency of use (61), followed by '*downsizing'*, whose frequency of use was (58), in the category of economy-associated euphemisms.

Based on data presented in table3.4., euphemisms '*physically-challenged person/s'* and *'...-impaired person/s'* had the highest frequencies of use in the category of disability-associated euphemisms,(31) and (22) respectively.

Table 4.4. illustrates that there were appreciable numerical differences associated with the frequencies of sex-linked euphemisms. In this category, '*illicit affair'* had the highest frequency of use(35). Other euphemisms of this category, however, had substantially lower frequencies of use. '*Liaison'*, the second most frequently-used euphemism of the category, for instance, had the frequency of (14).

Table5.4., which provides information on death-associated euphemisms, shows that both euphemisms of this category had similar frequencies. However, one of them, viz. '*pass away'*, was used more frequently than the other one.

Table 6.4., which deals with the category of poverty-associated euphemisms, indicates that all the three euphemisms falling into this category had fairly high frequencies. However, one of them, viz. '*disadvantaged'*, was used more frequently than others. In fact, the foregoing

euphemism had the highest frequency of use among all the euphemisms of the six categories discussed above.

Table 7.4., which summarizes other tables' data, reveals that, overall, military euphemisms and poverty-linked euphemisms had the first and second highest frequencies of use respectively. What is notable is that military euphemisms were used appreciably more frequently than poverty-related euphemisms, but, one poverty-linked euphemism had the highest frequency of use among euphemisms of all the six categories in question.

To qualitatively interpret the data discussed presented above, a number of points have to be taken into account.

The first point is that all the euphemisms the current study focused on were taken from three international English-speaking mass media. All the three media associations in question were either Western (BBC World News and France 24 English), or Western-leaning (AlJazeera English). The affiliations and leanings of these media organizations,

which have been repeatedly accused of media bias(Jeffries(2010), Darwish(2010), Palmegiano(2012)), have no doubt affected the discourses used by their news-casters, correspondents, commentators and guests from whose words research data were collected.

The second point is that, as table 7.4. illustrates, a fairly large number of euphemisms were used by the three fore-mentioned media organizations' television news bulletins, which corroborates Grillo(2005)'s words on the frequent employment of euphemisms, both innocuous and potentially deceptive ones, by the English-speaking media.

The third point is that, given researcher's use of news bulletins' materials for data collection, all the euphemisms elicited and analyzed were the ones dealing with current affairs, unfolding developments and ongoing situations and crises associated with the three-month period during which the data were collected. This partly accounts for the use of a large number of military and economy-associated euphemisms.

With regard to the category of military euphemisms, most of the high-frequency euphemisms were directly related to the ongoing crisis in Syria, some were related to military violence in parts of Mali and Sudan, and a small number were linked to sporadic violence and armed clashes in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Libya and Egypt.

In relation to category of economy-related euphemisms, high-frequency euphemisms were all related to the unfolding economic crisis in Europe and the United States as well as its repercussions in Asia and emerging countries.

As with the category of poverty-related euphemisms, the most high-frequency euphemism, viz. '*disadvantaged*', was used many times because of the deteriorating state of the global economy and its undesirable consequences, especially unemployment and rising poverty, in different countries all across the world.

What the discussion of the findings illustrates, and has already been highlighted, is that the time period during which research data were collected and the type of media materials used

for data-collection purposes have had a significant impact on the study's findings. The time period for data-collection of this research was characterized numerous military and financial incidents and developments which received extensive media coverage, and it explains why euphemisms associated with these issues were used far more frequently than euphemisms relating to other categories. So, it has to be said that if the study's data collection part had been carried out during another time period, the euphemisms' frequencies, and consequently the study's findings, could have been different. Therefore, there is a need for future research to pick over this topic and use more diverse media materials during longer periods in order to enrich this line of research.

This study is inevitably linked in various ways to some other areas and lines of research not least Discourse Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis. So, the findings can be examined from these perspectives as well.

What needs to be highlighted here is that media discourses, which are far from neutral (Ott & Mack(2009)), are influenced by a large number of factors not least the leanings and affiliations of different media organizations and their funders(Nasser, Berlin & Wong(2011). Therefore, the type of discourse used by one media outlet can be profoundly influenced by such factors and become very different from the type of discourse another media association uses in its coverage of news. In this study, as was stated earlier, all the research data were collected from three media organizations with strong Western or Western-leaning affiliations and stances. Given this, and the fact that media discourses are so powerful these days that can even ideologize the language used in different media (Milani(2010)), it has to be acknowledged that the study's findings have been deeply influenced by the biased and ideologized discourses employed by the news sources used.

Yet another point which must be mentioned in this part is that some of the euphemisms used by different media are controversial and divisive, so much so that there are profound disagreements as to their use and potential for deception. A clear example is the frequent use of '*humanitarian/armed intervention'* by the Western media to refer to attempts by some Western countries to get directly involved in other countries' military crises or civil wars. The term, which might seem quite innocuous and acceptable, can harbor a lot of controversial and unpleasant things behind its veneer and, therefore, its use by the Western media, deserves scholarly attention and scrutiny from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis. Given the controversiality and severely divisive political aspects associated with the foregoing euphemism, despite its frequent use by the three media used for data-collection, it was excluded from the study. This divisiveness also holds true for the military euphemism '*collateral damage/deaths'*, which, as this study shows, had a high frequency of use. It has been used many times by warring parties to mildly refer to the allegedly unintentional infliction of harm to non-combatants in war situations. The United States, NATO and Israel have all made use of this euphemism many times (Schmidl(2000)) and, therefore, it has become a doubly controversial euphemism too. It is hoped that given the increasing use of euphemisms, especially controversial ones, by different media with different leanings and affiliations, future research will focus on such terms and expressions and analyze them from,

among other perspectives, Critical Discourse Analysis and Media Discourse Analysis points of view.

The final point is that, given the complexities and controversies inextricably linked with euphemisms, they deserve more pedagogical attention. Perhaps the radical notion of designing courses exclusively dealing with euphemism is not a popular or feasible one, but, given the exposure of many ESL/EFL learners to media materials and the use of these materials for language-learning purposes, there is a need for the clarification, explanation and critical examination of euphemisms with high frequencies of use by the English-speaking media in ESL/EFL classes.

6. Concluding Remarks

As this paper reveals, euphemisms often function as a double-edged sword. Although they can be used for legitimate and justifiable purposes, they can also be used for the utterly reprehensible purpose of deception. In our constantly-changing and increasingly inter-connected world, euphemisms have a special place and, as noted earlier, are widely coined and used by different political and military individuals and entities for rather dodgy reasons. The First Gulf War, the Balkans' War of the 1990s, the Iraq Invasion of 2003, the Gaza War of 2008-9, and the current war between Israel and Gaza militants have all given rise to the emergence and frequent use of euphemisms. It seems that with the changing military, political, economic and environmental landscape of our world, the linguistic landscape is also inevitably changed, and the international media, depending upon their affiliations and editorial policies, will continue to coin and peddle different euphemisms for both legitimate and illegitimate reasons.

The current Arab-Israeli conflict is perhaps a timely reminder of the use of euphemisms and the controversial issues inextricably linked with them. Israel's use of terms such as '*surgical air strikes*' and '*taking out terror targets*', which we have heard time and again from the English-speaking media, are good examples of terms which may be seen as euphemisms to which some may object.

Another current international development presenting us with good examples of euphemisms is the scandal surrounding the erstwhile Director of the CIA. The use of euphemisms such as '*inappropriate communications*' and '*private* affair' to refer to his displaying marital infidelity serve as other recent examples of euphemisms.

In today's world, the proliferation of media organizations in all parts of the world and their biased discourses have worked hand in hand to lead to the unremitting bombardment of global citizens with euphemisms many of which they cannot make sense of adequately. So, it is necessary for future research to focus attention on the biased media discourse and euphemisms of media entities in the Middle East, Asia and Africa and shed more light on how news consumers are exposed to different euphemisms by different media. As for the area of language education, given that today's teenagers and adults are largely savvy with the Internet and digital devices and have access to them, it is necessary for curriculum designers as well as language educators to raise the awareness of learners regarding euphemisms.

Perhaps a general introduction of euphemisms and the purposes they serve coupled with different examples of them can be the first effective step in this direction.

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