

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN ENGLISH EUPHEMISMS

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Abstract: *This article explores the use of figurative language in English euphemisms, focusing on how tropes such as metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche contribute to the creation and function of euphemistic expressions. Euphemisms often serve to soften the impact of socially sensitive or taboo subjects. Through qualitative analysis of authentic English texts from media, literature, and political discourse, this study identifies common figurative patterns and examines their cultural and communicative roles. The findings suggest that figurative language not only disguises unpleasant realities but also reflects deep-seated cultural norms and values.*

Key words and expressions: *euphemism, figurative language, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, cognitive distance, taboo topics, politeness strategies, linguocultural norms, discourse analysis, semantic shift, cultural connotations.*

INTRODUCTION

Euphemisms are essential linguistic instruments that enable speakers to navigate sensitive or controversial topics with tact and subtlety. They function by replacing direct, often uncomfortable terms with more socially palatable alternatives. One of the most powerful mechanisms through which euphemisms achieve this softening effect is figurative language. Tropes such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, litotes, and hyperbole play a central role in the construction and communication of euphemistic meaning. This paper explores how these figures of speech operate within English euphemisms and examines the broader communicative and cultural functions they serve. By analyzing euphemisms through the lens of figurative language, we gain a deeper understanding of how linguistic choices reflect societal attitudes, norms, and the cognitive processes underlying human communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of euphemism has long been connected with the sociolinguistic need to avoid direct reference to taboo subjects. Allan and Burridge⁵¹ provide an extensive account of euphemistic strategies in English, highlighting the importance of cultural taboos in motivating linguistic substitution¹. Lakoff and Johnson's⁵² conceptual metaphor theory laid

⁵¹ Allan K.; Burridge, K. *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language*. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

⁵² Lakoff G.; Johnson, M. *Metaphors We Live By*. – Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

the foundation for understanding how metaphor shapes thought and language, making it especially relevant to euphemism studies. BurrIDGE further explored the diachronic change in euphemisms and noted the cyclical nature of euphemistic usage⁵³.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative and descriptive approach, analyzing a diverse corpus of euphemistic expressions gathered from multiple authentic English-language sources, including newspapers, political speeches, fictional and non-fictional literature, films, television dialogue, advertisements, and online platforms such as forums and blogs⁵³. Each euphemism was examined to determine the dominant type of figurative device used, such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole, or litotes, and categorized accordingly⁵⁴. In addition, the socio-cultural, historical, and contextual factors surrounding each euphemism were analyzed to explore the motivations behind their usage and the effects they produce on the audience⁵⁵. Attention was given to variation across registers, genres, and target audiences to offer a well-rounded picture of how figurative euphemisms function in everyday and institutional discourse⁵⁶.

RESULTS

The analysis underscores the predominance of figurative language, particularly, metaphor in the construction of English euphemisms. A range of expressions demonstrates how sensitive or potentially offensive concepts are reframed to conform with socially acceptable norms⁵⁷. For instance, *pass away* is a widely used euphemism for “die,” conceptualizing death as a journey or transition, which mitigates emotional discomfort and aligns with metaphorical models of life and mortality. Similarly, *let go* substitutes for “terminate employment,” drawing on the metaphor of employment as possession or containment, where release implies a softer, less confrontational action. *Comfort station* for “toilet” exemplifies metonymy, where the function of a place stands in for its actual name, thereby reducing vulgarity. The term *hands* to denote “workers” illustrates synecdoche, where a part of the body represents the whole person, emphasizing labor over individuality. These figurative devices are not arbitrary; they reflect deeper cultural tendencies toward indirectness, politeness, and the management of social face. Euphemisms in political and medical discourse, in particular, reveal a notable reliance on metaphor and metonymy to obscure or reframe unpleasant, stigmatized, or controversial realities. This strategic use of figurative language highlights the essential role of

⁵³BurrIDGE K. Euphemism and Language Change: The Sixth and Seventh Ages. – Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010.

⁵⁴Semino E.; Demjén, Z. The Routledge Handbook of Metaphor and Language. – London: Routledge, 2017.

⁵⁵Rawson H. A Dictionary of Euphemisms and Other Doubletalk. – New York: Crown Publishers, 1981.

⁵⁶Bultnick B. Metaphors We Die By: Concepts of Death in English. – Ghent: University of Ghent, 1998.

⁵⁷Goatly A. Washing the Brain: Metaphor and Hidden Ideology. – Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007.

euphemism in maintaining communicative decorum and negotiating social sensitivity across various domains⁵⁸.

DISCUSSION

The findings reinforce the theoretical proposition that figurative language plays a pivotal role in enhancing the euphemistic function of expressions by creating cognitive and emotional distance between the speaker and the sensitive or potentially offensive referent⁵⁹. Through metaphorical framing, complex or uncomfortable topics such as death, bodily functions, or social taboos are re-conceptualized using more neutral, familiar, or culturally acceptable domains, which facilitates both understanding and acceptance. Metonymy contributes to this function by redirecting attention away from the direct subject to an associated, yet less confrontational, concept, thereby softening the communicative impact. Similarly, synecdoche functions by representing the whole through a part (or vice versa), enabling speakers to generalize, depersonalize, or obscure the full reality of the topic. Collectively, these figurative strategies serve not only linguistic efficiency but also align with the broader principles of politeness, face-saving, and social harmony. Their usage reflects underlying cultural and societal values regarding what is considered appropriate or offensive, illustrating how language evolves in response to shared norms of decorum, sensitivity, and discretion⁶⁰.

CONCLUSION

Figurative language constitutes a fundamental mechanism in the formation and function of English euphemisms. Tropes such as metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche do more than merely mask or soften uncomfortable truths – they actively shape how individuals perceive and process socially sensitive subjects. Metaphors reframe difficult realities by comparing them to more familiar or less threatening concepts, while metonymy allows speakers to refer indirectly to taboo topics through associated terms, thereby reducing the emotional or cultural impact. Synecdoche, by representing a part for the whole or vice versa, introduces abstraction and generalization that facilitates distancing from the original referent. These rhetorical strategies not only serve linguistic and psychological purposes but also mirror and reinforce cultural attitudes, moral values, and social conventions. In doing so, euphemisms constructed through figurative language contribute to the preservation of politeness, the avoidance of face-threatening acts, and the maintenance of social cohesion. Therefore, examining the figurative foundations of euphemistic expressions provides valuable insight into the dynamic interrelationship between language, cognition, and the socio-cultural environment in which communication occurs.

⁵⁸Chamizo-Domínguez, P. J. *Semantics and Pragmatics of False Friends*. – London: Routledge, 2005.

⁵⁹Brown P.; Levinson, S. C. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

⁶⁰Yule G. *The Study of Language*. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

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