

EUPHEMISMS IN THE ENGLISH MASS MEDIA

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Abstract: Euphemism refers to the use of mild, indirect, or less offensive terms to replace harsh or unpleasant ones. In the context of the mass media, euphemisms play a significant role in shaping the tone, influencing public perception, and often serving as a tool for diplomacy, tact, and politeness. The strategic use of euphemism in the English language within the media can reflect societal norms, protect sensitivities, and, at times, manipulate the way information is perceived by the public.

Introduction

Definition: A euphemism is a mild or less direct word or expression substituted for one that is considered too harsh, blunt, or unpleasant. It helps to address sensitive topics like death, bodily functions, or negative qualities in a less confrontational manner.

A euphemism is typically used to soften the impact of difficult or controversial topics. In the mass media, this linguistic device helps create a more polished and palatable narrative, especially when discussing topics that may be taboo, sensitive, or potentially offensive. Euphemisms are essential for maintaining a sense of civility and professionalism in media reporting, enabling journalists to discuss uncomfortable issues without alienating or distressing their audience.

The key purposes of euphemisms in mass media include:

- **Politeness and Tact:** To avoid offending the audience by using harsh language.

- **Neutralization:** To present a controversial or negative subject in a more acceptable light.
- **Censorship:** To hide or obscure unpleasant realities.
- **Softening Impact:** To mitigate the emotional weight of a situation, such as a tragedy or crime.
- **Political Correctness:** To ensure language adheres to current social norms regarding inclusivity and sensitivity.

Examples of Euphemisms in the Media

In English-language mass media, euphemisms are commonly found in a variety of topics, such as politics, war reporting, death, and social issues. Below are some notable examples of euphemistic expressions:

a. Political and Economic News

- **"Downsizing":** Instead of saying "layoffs" or "redundancies," the term "downsizing" is often used to describe the process of reducing the number of employees in a company. This term softens the negative impact of job loss and makes it sound like a strategic business decision rather than a failure.
- **"Collateral damage":** In war reporting, "collateral damage" is a euphemism for civilian casualties or destruction of non-military property. This phrase distances the action from its human consequences, reducing its moral weight.
- **"Enhanced interrogation techniques":** A euphemism for torture, used by certain governments to avoid the negative connotations associated with the practice.

b. Death and Illness

- **"Passed away" or "departed":** These are gentler ways to describe someone dying, as opposed to the more direct "died."
- **"In a better place":** This euphemism is often used to offer comfort, implying that the deceased is in heaven or another peaceful realm, avoiding the harsh reality of death.

- **"Long-term illness"**: Used as a euphemism for serious or terminal diseases such as cancer, to shield the audience from the emotional weight of the condition.

c. Sexual and Social Issues

- **"Alternative lifestyle"**: This euphemism has been used in the media to describe homosexuality in a less direct and controversial manner, although it has fallen out of favor in recent years due to its implications of non-normativity.
- **"Adult entertainment"**: A euphemism for pornography or striptease, which is a more socially acceptable term in mainstream media.

d. Crime and Legal Reporting

- **"Affair"**: Instead of saying "adultery," media outlets often use "affair," which softens the moral implications of infidelity in relationships.
- **"White-collar crime"**: Refers to non-violent, financially motivated crimes typically committed by business professionals, as opposed to the harsher "fraud" or "embezzlement."

Why Euphemisms Are Used in the Media

The use of euphemism in the media is not only for aesthetic or stylistic reasons but also for strategic purposes. Euphemisms help the media navigate sensitive subjects in a way that reduces the risk of backlash and controversy. Below are some key reasons why euphemisms are employed in the media:

a. Sensationalism and Audience Sensitivity

Media outlets often want to discuss important issues without causing unnecessary distress or alienation among their audience. Euphemisms offer a way to present serious topics, such as crime, war, or disease, without sounding too harsh or alienating viewers.

b. Maintaining Professionalism and Objectivity

Journalistic standards encourage the use of neutral language to avoid bias. By using euphemisms, journalists can present information in a manner that is less likely to provoke emotional reactions, ensuring they maintain a tone of professionalism and impartiality.

c. Political and Social Influence

Euphemisms can also reflect political agendas. For example, political leaders may use euphemisms in speeches and media coverage to downplay controversial actions or policies. For instance, the term "regime change" may be used to describe military intervention that leads to the overthrow of a foreign government, making it sound more like a legitimate goal than an act of war.

d. Censorship and Regulation

In many countries, media outlets are regulated by government bodies that impose censorship to protect the public from content deemed inappropriate or too graphic. Euphemisms allow for the coverage of sensitive topics, like violence or nudity, in a way that complies with censorship laws.

The Criticism of Euphemism in the Media

While euphemisms serve useful purposes, they are not without criticism. Some argue that the overuse of euphemisms in the media can lead to a lack of transparency and accountability. When the media relies too heavily on euphemisms, it may obscure the true nature of events, especially when discussing critical issues like war, injustice, or corruption.

For example, when media outlets use phrases like "military intervention" instead of "invasion" or "collateral damage" instead of "civilian deaths," it can diminish the seriousness of the situation and mislead the public. This practice can be seen as a form of manipulation, as it frames events in a way that serves the interests of those in power.

Euphemism reflects the various states of social psychology. Many factors of social psychology may account for euphemizing. However, avoiding taboos, being polite and disguising one's speech are the most basic and typical ones. To avoid taboos is the principal psychological basis on which euphemisms are created. In many cultures, the names of gods and devils are taboos and people try to avoid mentioning them directly. That's why English people euphemize the name of "Satan" as "god of this world", "his sable majesty", "old gentleman in black" or "old Harry". They even spell god as "g-d," or "gosh", etc. In this sense,

we can say the 379 380 Maka Baladze existence of taboo words or taboo ideas stimulates the creation of euphemism. (www.cscanada.org)

Conclusion

Euphemisms in the English mass media are a powerful tool for shaping discourse and guiding public opinion. They provide a way to discuss sensitive and controversial issues in a manner that is less abrasive or offensive. However, their use must be carefully balanced to ensure that the media remains transparent and responsible in its reporting. As with all language choices, euphemisms can both serve and hinder the truth, depending on their context and the motivations behind their use.

In the ever-evolving landscape of media, it is crucial for audiences to develop critical media literacy skills to recognize when euphemisms are being used and to question the underlying messages they may be concealing. By doing so, individuals can gain a clearer understanding of the information presented to them, ultimately making more informed decisions about the world around them.

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