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# Euphemisms in English Internet News Discourse: Creating an Event Perspective

*This research is based on the theoretical foundations that regard euphemization as the cognitive process of conceptualization of a forbidden reality which is manifested in discourse through the use of various linguistic mechanisms such as lexical substitution, morphological modification, syntagmatic grouping or combination etc., that enable the speaker to attenuate or in a certain context or situation to reinforce a certain forbidden concept or reality. This article studies euphemisms in English news texts in terms of their event perspective. Event is understood as a change in a situation which is reported. Despite the ultimate uniqueness of events, there are universal elements that constitute them. They are participants, actions, objects/ instruments, time, place, result/consequences. The choice and verbal representation of these elements creates event perspective. In Internet news, the majority of euphemisms focus on action (41 %) and on participants (38 %), 10 % – on time and place, 6 % of euphemisms focus on objects or instruments and 5 % of euphemisms focus on result and consequence.*
***Key words:*** *euphemism, news discourse, event, perspective, conceptualization.*

The notion of euphemization is being investigated *in lexicology*, stylistics cognitive linguistics and in discourse studies. Various inquiries in lexicology provide classifications of the ways how euphemisms are formed [16], trace motivational factors for euphemistic use [Liszka 1990], conduct diachronic research into their history [Coleman 1992; Linfoot-Ham 2005], analyzing trends and stages of the development of euphemistic vocabulary [Allan and Burridge 1991, Holder 2003, Allan and Burridge 2006]. *In stylistics*, the effects created by euphemisms in the texts of various functional styles are studied [Hodge 1993]. Since words may have negative and positive connotations, the implications of euphemistic and derogatory vocabulary is important for interpreting texts – derogatory words show a critical attitude towards the referents described or the recipients and euphemisms refer to something embarrassing or unpleasant in a way that makes it seem more acceptable and neutral [Hornby 2004: 339–428]. *In cognitive linguistics*, the process of

conceptualization of a forbidden reality and its manifestation in language is studied [Pfaff 1997; Crespo Fernandez 2006]. *In discourse studies*, euphemisms are being explained in terms of their social and situational aspects [Katsev 1988], as face-saving techniques in politics, religion, law, and education [Бацевич 200: 213] and as means of political correctness [Rawson 1981: 1].

Among various discourse types, the notion of euphemization is especially conspicuous in media texts, because they provide news and opinions as viewed by journalists or media agencies [Добросклонская 2003: 26]. Despite the wide range of research into euphemization, this notion has so far evaded the grasp in media discourse, showing how an event is described when replacing one word with another to soften the impact of concepts with the potential to cause offence and social disapproval. Though there have been analyses of how people euphemize unpleasant issues linguistically with the topics avoided that keep changing, we think there is still a lot of ground to be covered. The basic idea we ground our investigation on is that euphemisms in news text create an event perspective. Therefore, the aim of this work is to study euphemisms in English news texts in terms of their event perspective. The material of the research is constituted by the corpus of 50 euphemisms singled out from British and American news articles from 2012–2017.

The term *euphemism* is derived from two Greek words: *eu* meaning *well* or *sounding good*, and *pheme* signifying speech [Merriam-Webster: e-ref]. There exists a plethora of definitions of euphemisms in research literature which can be classified into two main groups: the *extralinguistic* and *linguistic* definitions.

*Extralinguistic* definitions take into account the situations where euphemistic expressions are preferable and classify them according to their pragmatic value. For example, Scott argues that speakers tend to invoke euphemisms and are encouraged by others to invoke euphemistic forms or phrasing as a means of "skirting around" issues and ideas which otherwise would be problematic and/or discomforting to address by more direct means [Scott 1990: 28]. Casas Gomez (2009) defines euphemism or dysphemism as "the cognitive process of conceptualization of a forbidden reality" which is manifested in discourse through the use of linguistic mechanisms including lexical substitution, phonetic alteration, morphological modification, composition or inversion, syntagmatic grouping or combination, verbal or paralinguistic modulation or textual description. They enable the speaker in a certain context or in a specific pragmatic situation to attenuate, or on the contrary to reinforce a certain forbidden concept or reality [Gomez 2009: 738].

*Linguistic* definitions of euphemisms are based on the mechanisms underlying their creation or linguistic resources employed for their production, as well as their motivation. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a *euphemism* as a figure of speech which consists in the substitution of a word or expression of comparatively favorable implication or less unpleasant associations, instead of the harsher or more offensive one that would more precisely designate what is intended [OED: e-ref]. From this definition, it is clear that such replacement partakes of the nature of metaphor.

Major dictionaries of the English language ascribe the following attributes to euphemistic expressions: they are mild, vague, roundabout, indirect, polite, less distasteful, inoffensive, agreeable, tactful, less explicit, have comparatively favorable implications or less unpleasant associations [Horny 2005: 42], whereas the substituted phrase is characterized as harsh, blunt, direct, distasteful, painful, unpleasant, taboo, indelicate, offensive, or frightening [Halmari 2011: 828]. According to Holder [Holder 2008: 34] euphemism is a milder or uncertain term, which is used to replace an unsuitable or impertinent expression, e.g. *Technology helps visually impaired navigate the Tube* (BBC 05.03.2015). In this sentence, the word *blind* is replaced by *visually impaired* to sound politically correct and insure politeness towards the minority group – people with visual disabilities.

Longman's definition of euphemism takes into account the presence of a hearer. According to the dictionary, *euphemism* is an indirect term that is used by a speaker "to save a hearer from being shocked or feeling embarrassed or upset" [Longman, 2009: 13]. In the following sentence, the euphemistic expression *surgical strike* is used to replace the phrase *bombing attack by plane*: *India made headlines in late September after carrying out "surgical strikes" on militants across the de-facto border in disputed Kashmir* (BBC 23.10.2016). This euphemism saves the readers from being shocked and deceives the reader not fully revealing the truth.

The speaker using euphemisms is motivated not only by a hearer. Glone claims that there exists a term *face* which is important in understanding the reasons of using euphemistic expressions. *Face* means how a speaker represents himself/herself and signifies his/her social image [Glone, 2003: 10]. In situations when mentioning a subject with negative connotations is necessary, the speaker "saves his/her face" by the use of a euphemism, e.g. *Some scientists say Fukushima is worse than the 1986 Chernobyl accident, with which it shares a maximum level-7 rating* (Independent 28.08.2011). In this sentence,

Chernobyl disaster is replaced by *Chernobyl accident* to minimize the shock and soften the impact, as a lot of negative connotations are ascribed to this subject. So, the scientists described in the article "save their faces" by evaluating the impact of explosions they discuss.

Along with face-saving, Keith Allan involves the notion of the so-called 'loss of a face' into his definition of euphemisms. He claims that a euphemism is a substitution for an inappropriate term, which is used to save the face of a speaker, hearer or the face of some third party, otherwise the face would be lost [Allan, 1991: 25], e.g. *She said the café's owner "escorted" her from the premises when her two-year-old daughter started to cry* (BBC 11.08.2017). Using the phrase *to be kicked out/ thrown out of building* which is evidently suitable in this context would result in the speaker's loss of face, so the unpleasant phrase is replaced by the formulation of being *escorted from premises* to make it sound less harsh and save the face of the speaker. Moreover, using the word *escorted* in the inverted commas shows that the speaker had been thinking carefully about the suitable linguistic expression.

Mechanisms of Creating Euphemisms: Components of Connotative Meaning

Pinker illustrates connotational aspects of meaning by the formula devised by Bertrand Russell in a 1950s radio interview:

*I am firm; you are obstinate; he is pigheaded* [Pinker 2007: 18].

In this triplet, the words denote very similar concepts, but the attitudinal meanings communicated by them range from attractive to neutral to offensive or in Allan and Burridge's (2006) parlance: from euphemism to orthophemism to dysphemism – a continuum of co-referential cross-varietal synonyms which share the denotation but differ in connotations. Similarly to Russell's triplet, the nomination religious organization, is a euphemism clearly representing the point of view of someone whose attitude to it is positive, while referring to the same religious group as a sect is dysphemistic as in most cases the connotations communicated by the use of this word will be negative enough to provide evidence of the negative stance assumed by the speaker.

Allan (2006) quotes Leech (1981) as saying that connotations are semantic effects that arise from encyclopedic knowledge about its denotation (or referent) and also from experiences, beliefs, and prejudices about the contexts in which the expression is typically used [Allan 2006: 41].

Connotative meaning consists of four components [Мороховский 1984: 95]:

1) emotive;

2) evaluative;

3) expressive;

4) functional stylistic.

A word is always characterized by its denotative meaning but not necessarily by connotation. The four components may be all present at once, or in different combinations or they may not be found in the word at all.

1. Emotive connotations express various feelings or emotions.

Example: "*Students are ticked off by ban on watches in exams.*" [Guardian 05.05.2017]. Emotion "angry" is replaced by "to be ticked off by" to belittle students' indignation.

2. The evaluative component charges the word with negative, positive, ironic or other types of connotation conveying the speaker's attitude in relation to the object of speech. Very often this component is a part of the denotative meaning, which comes to the fore in a specific context.

Example: "*In addition to this the study found that 10 % of women had been promised promotions or better treatment if they were "sexually cooperative"* [Independent 28.11.2012]. The word "whore" is replaced by "sexually cooperative", which adds positive connotation to the word with originally derogatory connotation, to insure politeness towards the representatives of this profession.

3. Expressive connotation either increases or decreases the expressiveness of the message. Many scholars hold that emotive and expressive components cannot be distinguished but Prof. I. A. Arnold maintains that emotive connotation always entails expressiveness but not vice versa.

Example: "*An abandoned pitbull that has been running loose at Mon Repos Road in Cascade has been captured and put down to sleep*" [Guardian 23.10.2013] Euthanization is replaced by an expressive euphemism "to put down to sleep" to soften the impact on the readers.

4. Finally there is stylistic connotation. A word possesses stylistic connotation if it belongs to a certain functional style or a specific layer of vocabulary. Stylistic connotation is usually immediately recognizable. It's characteristic for poetic or elevated writing. As we deal with journalistic style, we are not as interested in this component of connotation.

To illustrate the role of connotations in conveying a certain perspective, Potapova (2008) gives the following examples: a person can be dismissed or fired.

Euphemism creation techniques involve some of the traditional word-formation types, but also present some peculiarities. The

techniques are similar in most languages and include the following methods:

1. Loans borrowed mainly from Latin and Greek. They are more technical and sound rather sophisticated, the meaning is not immediately apparent, e.g.: *illegal substances* (=drugs); to *micturate* (=to piss); *to rebate* (=bribe); *senior* (=elderly);

2. Widening of meaning – a word is usually semantically more general, and it is used to include the meaning of the avoidable term: *growth* (=cancer); *relationship* (=affair); *residents* (=prisoners); *assets* (=enemy targets);

3. Metonymic transfers: e.g.: One can often read at the fence the inscription: "*To stop* here is not allowed", where 'to stop' is a euphemistic nomination (used as a toilet);

4. Metaphoric transfers: *blossom* (=pimple); *theater of operations* (=battlefront); "*Diana's latest conquest.*" (=lover);

5. Ellipsis: e.g.: *lady's* (=lady's room); *action* (=military action); *remains* (=mortal remains);

6. Antiphrasis, e.g. when talking about an unpleasant smell: "*what a perfume!*" instead of "what a stink"!

7. Use of negative prefix, i.e. to use a negative prefix for softening the effect of the utterance or making it rather vague, e.g.: *underprivileged* (=poor); *disabled* (=crippled); *to disimprove* (=to make worse); *to deselect* (=to exclude);

8. Abbreviations, e.g.: *KIA* (=killed in action); *big C* (=cancer);

9. Adaptations, e.g.: *cripes* (=Christ); *gosh* (=good gracious); etc.; J. Neaman and C. Silver identified this method as phonetic distortion [Neaman 1995], while B. Warren named this method of euphemization as phonemic change [Warren 1996]; and Russian scholar V. P. Moskvin describes this method as paronymic change [Moskvin 2001].

10. Truncation – deletion of some letters in writing, hence asterisks and hyphens can be used, e.g.: *G-d* (=God);

11. Longer periphrasis, where lexemes are gaining semi-affix status, e.g.: *differently abled* (=crippled, disabled); *visually impaired* (=blind); *physically different* / *challenged* (= crippled, disabled), etc. [Veisbergs, 2001].

12. A deliberate ambiguity which is fully clarified in the further context is a way of creating euphemisms: *to go somewhere* (to the toilet room);

13. Deliberate incorrectness of nomination:

a) *generosity* (= wastefulness); *invent* (= lie);

b) *synecdohe;*

c) *meiosis* – change for a word, expressing incomplete action or weak property, e.g.: *to stop the membership in the organization* (=to exclude from the party); *plump* (=fat); *unclean* (=dirty),etc.

There seem to be waves of euphemization when either a particular type of euphemism creation is heavily used or a sphere of human activities undergoes serious euphemization.

To trace the mechanisms of creating euphemisms, we employed the components of connotation suggested by professors A. N. Morokhovsky and O. P. Vorobyova. They are evaluative, emotive, expressive and functional stylistic.

Having analyzed 50 news articles, it became evident that the majority of euphemisms focus on action (41 %) and on participants (38 %). 6 % of euphemisms focus on objects or instruments, 10 % – on time and place and 5 % of euphemisms focus on result and consequence.

41 % of the analyzed corpus of euphemisms focus on actions. They are usually used to describe political and military spheres. In example (1) below, the word *to plagiarize* is softened to the phrases *inspired by* and *borrow lines from*. Melania Trump is the first lady of the USA, that's why accusations of plagiarism could entail negative consequences. Besides it deceives the reader, not fully revealing the truth.

(1) *Trump camp admits: "Michelle Obama 'inspired' Melania's speech* [*USA Today* 20.07.2016]. *Melania Trump's speech borrowed lines from Michelle Obama* [*PBS News* 19.07.2016].

In example (2), *genocide* is substituted for *ethnic cleansing*, and in example (3) *war* – for *conflict*:

(2) *The sectarian violence between Christian and Muslim militias and civilian mobs that has plagued Central African Republic for the past several months has tipped into a full-fledged campaign of ethnic cleansing of Muslims from the capital Bangui and the southern part of the country* [*NY Times* 05.06.2014].

(3) *Syria conflict: Manbij militia to hand villages to army* [BBC 02.03.2017].

We can observe how euphemisms protect readers from undesired arousal and prevent unwanted connotations.

Another 38 % of the corpus of euphemisms focus on participants. They are most often used to describe politicians, representatives of particular professions, minorities etc. In example 4 below the word *lie* is replaced with *be economical with the truth:*

(4) *Last night Labour accused Mr Cameron of being "economical with the truth* [Independent 8.03.2013].

Since David Cameron is a renowned and respected politician, allegations of lying are replaced by the euphemism *to be economical with the truth* which deceives the readers and gives them the wrong idea.

In example (5) the lexical unit mentally retarded person is replaced with a person with learning difficulties. This euphemism insures politeness towards a group of minorities: people with learning disabilities. Garbage collector is called a city sanitation worker/engineer in sentence (6), since the euphemism "city sanitation worker" provides alternative view of things and prevents unwanted connotations of this profession.

(5) *A group of artists <u>with learning difficulties</u>, who have broken out from community arts into mainstream professional arts, held an exhibition at Modern Art Oxford* [Oxfordshire Guardian 20.10.2016].

(6) *A city <u>sanitation worker</u> died in a freakish accident in Brooklyn yesterday after she was pinned on top of a garbage truck by a mechanical lever, city officials said* [NY Times 20.01.2014].

10 % of euphemisms analysed in the news articles focus on time and place:

(7) *While waiting to be placed in <u>nursing home</u>, his wife, Anita, also applied for senior assisted living with the aim of joining her husband* [*BBC* 26.08.2016].

(8) *Prime Minister Joseph Muscat has officially launched the newly refurbished <u>correctional facility</u>* [*Independent* 27.04.2017].

In example (7) below the lexical unit *old-age home* is replaced with the euphemism *nursing home*, since getting older is considered a taboo topic, that's why to moderate the tone this euphemism is used. In such a way it makes an unmentionable concept mentionable. In sentence (8), the word *jail* is replaced with the euphemism *correctional facility*, because negative connotations ascribed to the word "jail" are reduced using the euphemism *correctional facility*.

6 % of euphemisms focus on objects or instruments:

(9) *Following a recent pledge from US President Donald Trump, new US military strategy may require more <u>boots on the ground</u> in Syria, a considerable change from the non-military tactics elsewhere in the region* [Sputnik News 27.02.2017].

In sentence (9), military attack is reduced to *boots on the ground* which prevents the readers from emotional arousal and masks the truth.

Finally, 5 % of euphemisms focus on result and consequence:

(10) *In order to better evaluate the relationship between health IT and <u>negative patient outcomes,</u> the team developed a "value chain" framework that allows for a more standardized assessment of how users interact with EHRs and how those interactions impact events* [Daily Mail 03.03.2017].

(11) *As Amnesty International has reported, throughout this war the US government has consistently stonewalled investigations of the thousands of Afghan civilians killed in "night raids by US Special Operations forces, air strikes, drone strikes and torture". The episodes are shrugged off as "collateral damage", the unintended consequences of warfare* [Huffington Post 07.07.2016].

In sentence (10), the phrase *death of a patient* is replaced with the euphemism *negative patient outcome* and in sentence (110 *killed civilians* are designated as *collateral damage*. These euphemisms provide a more neutral formulation for the words with negative connotations. In this way, they soften the impact on the speaker.

So, euphemisms clearly bear close relations with the language of political correctness, since all the classic formulations of political correctness show avoidance of direct reference to some embarrassing topics or conditions. In fact, euphemisms may be considered the main tools of political correctness.

The prospects for future investigation are seen in the possibility of further study of the process of euphemization in other discourses. Of a special and paramount interest is political discourse, since politicians are apt to play with words in different way to create particular effects.

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**Евфемізми як засоби створення перспективи подій в англомовному інтернет-дискурсі новин**

*Стаття розглядає евфемізацію як когнітивний процес концептуалізації заборонної реальності, що проявляється в дискурсі шляхом використання різних лінгвістичних механізмів, таких як лексичне заміщення, морфологічна модифікація, синтагматичне групування або комбінація тощо, котрі уможливлюють уникнення прямої номінації заборонених референтів. Стаття вивчає евфемізми в англійських новинних текстах в аспекті створення перспективи подій у новинах. Подія розуміється як зміна ситуації, про яку повідомляється. Вибір і вербальне представлення елементів події створює її перспективу. В інтернет-новинах більшість евфемізмів позначають заборонені чи неприйнятні дії (41 %), учасників (38 %), 10 % вказують на час і місце, 6 % евфемізмів зосереджуються на об'єктах або інструментах і 5 % евфемізмів орієнтуються на результат і наслідки.*
*Ключові слова: евфемізм, дискурс новин, подія, перспектива, концептуалізація.*

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**Эвфемизмы как средства создания перспективы событий в англоязычном интернет-дискурсе новостей**

*Статья рассматривает эвфемизацию как когнитивный процесс концептуализации запрещенной реальности, проявляющейся в дискурсе путем использования различных лингвистических механизмов, таких как лексическое замещение, морфологическая модификация, синтагматические группировки или комбинация и т.п., которые позволяют избежать прямой номинации запрещенных референтов.*

*Статья изучает эвфемизмы в английских новостных текстах в аспекте создания перспективы событий в новостях. Событие понимается как изменение ситуации, о которой сообщается. Выбор и вербальное представление элементов события создают ее перспективу. В интернет-новостях большинство эвфемизмов обозначают запрещенные или неприемлемые действия (41 %), участников (38 %), 10 % указывают на время и место, 6 % эвфемизмов именуют объекты или инструменты и 5 % эвфемизмов изображают результат и последствия.*

***Ключевые слова:*** *эвфемизм, дискурс новостей, событие, перспектива, концептуализация.*