

Introducing Euphemisms to Language Learners

Scott Alkire

s_alkire [at] hotmail.com

San Jose City College (San Jose, California, USA)

I. Introduction

There has been little EFL research on euphemisms, despite two facts: fluency in English cannot be achieved without a reasonable command of them, and a great number are semantically opaque. For learners, euphemisms represent a part of English largely untaught. This is rather incongruous, for as speakers of English we use euphemisms to express any number of everyday realities, and as passive listeners and readers we decode them daily to properly understand discourse in the workplace, the business world, the mass media, etc.

This paper presents a brief background of euphemism use in English along with a short glossary of common words and some of their current, popular euphemisms. Following the glossary is a lesson that introduces learners to euphemisms and explores the question of why, in Garner's (1998) words, they "thrive as much today as ever." (p. 266).

II. The Purpose of Euphemisms

Euphemisms are words we use to soften the reality of what we are communicating to a given listener or reader. They are a universal feature of language usage; all cultures typically use them to talk about things they find terrifying (e.g., war, sickness, death) because, anthropologically, "to speak a name was to evoke the divinity whose power then had to be confronted" (Neaman & Silver, 1983, pp. 1-2). Similarly, we use euphemisms to express taboos, as we feel, on some instinctual level, that the euphemism keeps us at safe distance from the taboo itself. Another use of euphemisms is to elevate the status of something (e.g., using educator for teacher, attorney for lawyer); but in general, we use euphemisms to express what is socially difficult to express in direct terms.

III. Latinate Roots of Euphemisms

A great number of euphemisms in English come from words with Latinate roots. Farb (1974) writes that after the Norman Conquest of England in 1066,

"The community began to make a distinction between a genteel and an obscene vocabulary, between the Latinate words of the upper class and the lusty Anglo-Saxon of the lower. That is why a duchess perspired and expectorated and menstruated--while a kitchen maid sweated and spat and bled." (p. 80)

The linguistic differences between earthy, direct Anglo-Saxon words and elegant, often euphemistic Latinate words have been largely ignored in language learning, despite the fact that knowledge of these differences is essential to natural, native like use of English. Similarly, euphemisms themselves--Latinate or otherwise--have been ignored in language learning, even though they are usually semantically opaque to learners and continue to be invented and employed.

Below is a short glossary of common words with some of their current, popular euphemisms. (Some euphemisms, it will be seen, have become euphemized themselves.) Following the glossary is a lesson for learners at the intermediate level.

IV. Short Glossary of Words and Their Euphemisms

Word	Euphemism
accident, crisis, disaster	incident
addict; addiction	substance abuser; substance abuse, chemical dependency
adulterous	extramarital
arrest (v)	apprehend
beggar	panhandler, homeless person
bombing	air support
break-in	security breach
brothel	massage parlor
cheap	frugal, thrifty, economical
coffin	casket
complaint form	response form
confinement	detention
criminal (adj)	illegal
criminal (young)	juvenile delinquent
crippled	disabled, physically challenged
custodian	building maintenance staff
dead	departed, deceased, late, lost, gone, passed
death insurance	life insurance
death penalty	capital punishment
death	demise, end, destination, better world, afterlife
deaths	body count
die	pass away, pass on, expire, go to heaven
drug addict	substance abuser
drugs	illegal substances
drunk (adj)	intoxicated, inebriated, tipsy
exploit (land)	develop
fail	fizzle out, fall short, go out of business
false (adj)	prosthesis
false teeth	dentures
fat	overweight, chubby, portly, stout, plump
fire (v)	lay off, release, downsize, let go, streamline, rightsize
garbage collector	sanitation person
garbage dump	landfill
genocide	ethnic cleansing
hyperactive	Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)
illegal worker	undocumented worker
imprisoned	incarcerated
informant	confidential source
jail	secure facility
jungle	rain forest
juvenile delinquent	problem child, at-risk child

kill	put down/away/out/to sleep
kill on a mass basis	liquidate
killing of innocents	collateral damage
lawyer	attorney
lazy	unmotivated
lie (n)	fib, fabrication, cover story, story, untruth, inaccuracy
make love	sleep with
money	funds
mortuary	funeral home/parlor
multi-racial	diverse
murder	hit, kill, do someone in, finish off someone
noisy	boisterous
office equipment	productivity products
old	mature, distinguished, senior, traditional, seasoned, new (e.g., "The house is two years new")
old age	golden age, golden years
old person	senior citizen, pensioner
old persons' home	convalescent hospital, retirement home, rest home, nursing home
one-room apartment	studio apartment, efficiency
pay (n)	remuneration, salary
person	representative, individual
perspire, perspiration	sweat
police officer	peace officer
poor children	at-risk children
poor nation	emerging nation, developing nation, third-world nation
poor student	underachiever, underperformer
poor	low-income, working class, modest, underprivileged
power failure	service interruption
prison	correctional facility
prisoner	inmate, convict, detainee
problem	issue, challenge, complication
rain, snow, hail	precipitation
remedial education	special education
removed from duty	put on administrative leave
repression (social, political)	law and order
retarded	special, slow, mentally challenged
rough	physical
rude	self-centered
sales	marketing
salesman, -woman	sales associate
say	indicate, disclose, mention
school	institute
secretary	administrative assistant

selfish	self-centered
sexual intercourse	sleep with, make love
sexual relations (illicit)	liaison
sexual relationship	involvement, intimate relationship, affair
sick	indisposed, ill, under the weather
small	quaint, cozy, petite
software product	solution
solve	resolve
spy (n)	source of information, agent
spying	surveillance
steal	appropriate, salvage, lift, borrow
stupid	slow
suicide (to commit)	to end it all, take the easy way out, do oneself in
surprise attack	preemptive strike
sweat (v)	perspire
talk (v, n)	converse (v), conversation (n)
teacher	educator
theft	inventory shrinkage
tip (n)	gratuity
toilet	john, WC, men's room, restroom, bathroom, washroom, lavatory
totalitarian	authoritarian
tramp	homeless person
ugly	unattractive, modest, plain
underwear (women's)	lingerie
unemployed	between jobs, taking time off
unreserved seating	general admission, festival seating
used	previously owned, pre-owned, refurbished, second-hand
vagrant	homeless person
venereal disease	social disease
victim	casualty
wrong	improper, questionable, impropriety (n)

V. Lesson: Understanding Euphemisms (Intermediate Level)

Objectives

The student will:

- Learn the word euphemism.
- Learn the taboo and uncomfortable subjects in English that give rise to most of our euphemisms.
- Appreciate euphemisms' semantic opaqueness.
- Identify euphemisms in newspaper articles, features, editorials, advertising, etc.
- Surmise, to a reasonable degree, why a euphemism is used, and what it connotes as compared to the original (often Anglo-Saxon) word it stands for.

In Class

Begin the lesson by explaining that English, like all languages, has subjects that can be difficult to talk about, because the original words for these subjects can offend, disturb, or embarrass the person one is addressing. State that for these subjects we use words called euphemisms, which are "softer" words than the original words. For example, mention that death is often talked about with euphemisms such as pass away, pass on, go to heaven, etc.

Write on the board poor, fat, and old and state that these words are often euphemized in English. Ask students if they know any euphemisms for them. (Possible answers might be, respectively, low-income, working class, modest; overweight, stout, portly, husky; senior, mature, traditional.) As students offer euphemisms, write them on the board.

Continue by pointing out that euphemisms are often difficult to understand on purely linguistic terms. To illustrate this, write the following sentences (or similar ones) on the board (this may be done in advance). Tell students to "translate" each sentence into clear, straightforward English. Provide photocopies of the glossary in this article for reference. (Note: as the glossary is organized by original word, not by euphemism, students will need to guess the meaning of the euphemisms by context.)

- His grandfather passed away.
- My father is between jobs but has two interviews today.
- The peace officer apprehended the sanitation man for speeding.
- The sales associate answered in the affirmative when the judge asked him if he had ever been incarcerated.
- The manager complained to his administrative assistant of inventory shrinkage.
- Our son is a special child.
- Dan's supervisor laid him off because he was unmotivated.
- American football is a physical game, and has disabled many players.
- The individual was accused of appropriating funds.
- The correctional facility has 220 inmates, five of whom are facing capital punishment.

Discussion

When the students are finished, call on some to read their "translations." The idea is for them to understand the softening and/or misleading nature of euphemisms. If you wish to expand the lesson, ask: When is the use of euphemisms "good" and when is it "bad"? Do news reporters--whose mission it is to report the news--ever use euphemisms? When? Should they use them?

Homework

Each student finds a newspaper article that uses at least five euphemisms and replaces them with more direct English words. The students bring in the original article (perhaps taped or pasted to a sheet of paper) with the euphemisms underlined and their "translations" written on the paper. (To complete the assignment the students will need to refer to the glossary in this article and/or a good dictionary.)

Follow-up to Homework

Have different students come to the board and write a sentence with a euphemism from their articles. Then have each student write his or her "translation" below it. After a few sentences have been written on the board, ask the class to speculate on why the euphemisms were used in each instance.

For Further Discussion

- Political leaders are notorious for their use of euphemisms. Why?

- "A language without euphemisms would be a defective instrument of communication." (Robert Burchfield, former editor, *The Oxford English Dictionary*) (Eschholz et al., 2000, p. 512). How would the language be defective?
- Bryan A. Garner (1998) writes that euphemisms "thrive as much today as ever." (p. 266). Surmise why this may be so.
- Ask students to volunteer euphemisms from their own languages. Are certain subjects euphemized more (or less) in other languages? Speculate on reasons why this might be so.

VI. References

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