

## EXPRESSING VALUES IN POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EUPHEMISMS

UDC 811.111'373.49

**Milica Radulović**

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš, Serbia

E-mail: mlcradulovic2@gmail.com

**Abstract.** *The paper analyses how values are expressed in positive and negative euphemisms. The research is based on a corpus of 40 euphemisms, 20 euphemisms which increase positive values of their equivalent non-euphemized items, and 20 euphemisms which decrease negative values of their non-euphemized equivalents, excerpted from R.W. Holder's (2002) wordbook *How Not to Say What You Mean: A Dictionary of Euphemisms*. Firstly, the paper focuses on the paradigmatic sense relations (between non-euphemized and euphemized items) that can help explain the transfer of meaning from a word or phrase that is direct or insulting to a euphemistic word or phrase which is less direct or less insulting. The results of this analysis are then used to explain the pragmatic mechanisms that can help relate the meaning of inoffensive terms to their more direct counterparts.*

**Key words:** *euphemisms, positive euphemisms, negative euphemisms, paradigmatic sense relations, pragmatic inference.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Euphemisms are used when we talk about "taboo or sensitive subjects", and therefore euphemistic language is "also the language of evasion, of hypocrisy, of prudery, and of deceit" (Holder 2002: vi). These roundabout expressions are strongly related to politeness; "that which is polite is at least inoffensive and at best pleasing to an audience, and that which is offensive is impolite" (Allan and Burridge 2006:30). When we use euphemistic words or phrases, we avoid saying things we think the audience would rather not hear for various reasons. Sometimes it means that an orthophemism, or a more direct expression is not used, and sometimes it means that a dysphemism, a corresponding dispreferred word or phrase is avoided. This paper analyses how the meaning of euphemisms is related to their more direct or dispreferred equivalents; the analysis begins with identifying the paradigmatic sense relations between euphemisms and their non-

euphemized counterparts seen as part of the language system, after which the paper focuses on the pragmatic inferential processes that can help uncover the real meaning behind circuitous expressions.

## 2. POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EUPHEMISMS

Euphemisms can be classified into two general types, positive and negative euphemisms (Rawson 1981: 1). Positive euphemisms are aimed at making denotata or referents look grander and more acceptable, and negative euphemisms decrease negative values that are associated with negative phenomena such as, for example, war, drunkenness, crime, poverty. Tables 1 and 2 give 20 positive and 20 negative euphemisms analysed in this paper, randomly selected from Holder's (2002) dictionary *How Not to Say What You Mean: A Dictionary of Euphemisms*. The euphemisms are typed in bold letters:

**Table 1.** Positive euphemisms

---

PROFESSIONS

1. **domestic** (a shortened form of domestic servant or domestic help) a servant in the home
2. **working people** *British* industrial workers not self-employed or in management
3. **personal assistant** a secretary
4. **sanitary man** a cleaner of lavatories
5. **exterminating engineer** *American* a controller of pests or vermin
6. **give to God** to commit (a child) to a priestly or monastic life

---

INSTITUTIONS AND PLACES

1. **eventide home** an institution for geriatrics
2. **flying squad** a police detachment organized for rapid deployment
3. **starter home** a small house
4. **social housing** accommodation built for poor people
5. **lower ground floor** a cellar or basement

---

ECONOMY

1. **financial services** moneylending
2. **financial assistance** *American* state aid for the poor
3. **low-budget** cheap

---

ADJECTIVES EMPHASIZING POSITIVE VALUES

1. **make an honest woman of** to marry a woman you have impregnated
2. **experienced** *American* second-hand
3. **golden years (the)** old age
4. **magic word (the)** please
5. **exclusive** expensive
6. **mature** old

---

**Table 2.** Negative euphemisms

---

**WAR**

1. **absorption** (literally, the chemical or physical process of assimilation) a military conquest
  2. **peace** a preparation for violence
  3. **collaborator** a traitor
  4. **conflict** a war
- 

**DRUNKENNESS**

1. **drink** an intoxicant or to drink intoxicants
  2. **drink problem** alcoholic addiction  
(also **cash problem** – a shortage of money, **a heart problem** – a malfunction of that organ)
  3. **to like a drink** – to have a perhaps modest alcoholic addiction
- 

**ILLNESS**

1. **the falling sickness** epilepsy
  2. **cardiac incident** a malfunction of the heart
  3. **health** illness (health clinics or farms, health insurance, National Health Service)
  4. **misadventure** – the consequence of error or negligence (**therapeutic misadventure** – the patient died after receiving incorrect treatment)
- 

**CRIME**

1. **payoff** a bribe or illegal reward
  2. **family** the Mafia
  3. **come to the attention of the police** to be a habitual criminal
  4. **oldest profession (the)** prostitution
  5. **organization (the)** a band of criminals
  6. **working girl** a prostitute
- 

**POVERTY**

1. **cash flow problem** an insolvency
  2. **country in transition** a poor and backward country
  3. **third world** poor
- 

**3. PARADIGMATIC SENSE RELATIONS****3.1. Types of sense relations**

The first part of the analysis focuses on the paradigmatic sense relations between noneuphemized items and their euphemistic counterparts. Paradigmatic sense relations refer to the semantic choices available at a particular structure point in the sentence and these relations typically involve words that belong to the same syntactic category (Cruse 2004:145-146). Tables 1 and 2 show that euphemisms and their equivalents can be either words or phrases, so this paper focuses on the paradigmatic sense relations that hold between euphemistic words or phrases and their counterparts that function as semantic units.

There are two basic types of sense relations: similarities and differences (Atkins and Rundell 2008: 131–144). The first basic type includes hyponymy and synonymy, meronymy and regular polysemy, and the second type refers to different types of antonymy: complementary antonymy, polar antonymy, directional antonymy, converseness. Cruse (2004: 148–170) names the two basic types of sense relations as the paradigmatic relations of identity and inclusion, and the paradigmatic relations expressing opposition and exclusion. The first type refers to hyponymy, meronymy and synonymy, and the second type refers to incompatibility (co-hyponymy, co-taxonymy and co-meronymy) and opposites (complementaries, antonymy, reversives, converses, polarity). Cruse (2004: 108–110) classifies hyponymy and meronymy as varieties of polysemy, which involves linear relations between polysemes (where B is a specialization of A); metaphor and metonymy are cases of non-linear polysemy.

### 3.2. Corpus analysis

The analysis of paradigmatic sense relations shows that hyponymy is the most common relation between euphemized and non-euphemized items. The paper relies on the diagnostic test for identifying hyponymy given by Cruse (2004: 149): hyponymy implies entailment between sentences which differ only in respect of the lexical items being tested. For example, *It's an apple* entails but is not entailed by *It's a fruit*. The euphemistic items are typed in bold letters:

#### A) POSITIVE EUPHEMISMS:

##### HYPONYM → HYPERONYM

1. industrial workers not self-employed or in management – **working people** (*workers* are replaced with the superordinate noun *people*)
2. a cleaner of lavatories – **sanitary man** (*a cleaner* is replaced with the superordinate noun *man*)
3. secretary – **a personal assistant** (*a secretary* is replaced with the hyperonym *assistant*; *a secretary* can be a euphemism for *a mistress*, so the noun *assistant* undoubtedly improves the status of *a secretary*)
4. moneylending – **financial services** (there are different kinds of financial services, one of which is moneylending)
5. state aid for the poor – **financial assistance** (*aid* and *assistance* are synonyms, but *state aid for the poor* is a specific kind of *assistance*)
6. a cellar or basement – **lower ground floor**

##### HYPERONYM → HYPONYM

1. a servant in the home – **domestic** (*domestic* is a hyponym of the noun *servant*)
2. an institution for geriatrics – **eventide home** (*home* is a kind of institution; the noun *home* has pleasant connotations)
3. small house – **starter home** (*house* and *home* are synonyms; but *starter home* is seen as a type of *a small house*)
4. accommodation built for poor people – **social housing** (*social housing* is a kind of *accommodation for poor people*)
5. a police detachment organized for rapid deployment – **flying squad** (the noun *detachment* has a more general meaning)

## FIXED EXPRESSIONS:

1. to commit (a child) to a priestly or monastic life – **give to God**
2. to marry a woman you have impregnated – **make an honest woman of**
3. old age – **golden years (the)**
4. please – **magic word (the)**

CO-TAXONOMY<sup>1</sup>

1. a controller of pests or vermin – **exterminating engineer** (a controller is a type of profession, and so is an engineer)

## SYNONYMS:

1. cheap – **low-budget**

Three more words are included in Table 1: *old*, *expensive* and *second-hand* and their corresponding positive euphemisms *mature*, *exclusive* and *experienced*. It is difficult to say which word would be the hyponym or the hyperonym in these pairs. For example, *mature* does not necessarily entail *old* in order to be considered a hyponym of the hyperonym *old*, and neither does *old* necessarily entail *mature*, so *old* cannot be considered a hyponym of the hyperonym *mature*. Therefore, it is better to say that *old*, *expensive* and *second-hand* are related senses of the polysemous words *mature*, *exclusive* and *experienced* respectively, whose interpretation is controlled by context.

## B) NEGATIVE EUPHEMISMS

## HYPONYM → HYPERONYM

1. a war – **conflict**
2. an intoxicant (or to drink intoxicants) – **drink**
3. alcoholic addiction – **drink problem**
4. a malfunction of the heart – **cardiac incident**
5. a bribe – **payoff**
6. mafia – **family** (these lexical items can also be hyponyms of the hyperonym *social unit*)
7. a prostitute – **working girl**
8. an insolvency – **a cash flow problem**
9. a band of criminals – **organization**
10. traitor – **collaborator**
11. the consequence of error or negligence – **misadventure** (*the consequence of error or negligence* is seen as a kind of *misadventure*)

## FIXED EXPRESSIONS:

1. to be a habitual criminal – **come to the attention of the police**
2. prostitution – **the oldest profession**
3. to have a perhaps modest alcoholic addiction – **to like a drink**
4. poor – **third world** (can be regarded as meronymy, the poor can be seen as part of the world population)
5. epilepsy – **the falling sickness** (sickness can be regarded as a hyperonym of *epilepsy*)

<sup>1</sup> Taxonomy is a variety of hyponymy (Cruse 2004: 149–150); co-taxonomy is seen as the relation *A is a kind of X; B is a different kind of X* and it is regarded as incompatibility (Cruse 2004: 162).

## ANTONYMY:

1. a preparation for violence – **peace** (the head noun is *preparation*, but the phrase itself is an antonym of the word *peace*)
2. illness – **health**

## HYPERONYM→HYPONYM

1. a poor and backward country – a country in transition (*a country in transition* is seen as a type of *a poor and backward country*)

## NON-LINEAR POLYSEMY:

1. a military conquest – **absorption**

### 3.3. Summary overview

Table 3 shows how many instances of different types of sense relations were found in both groups of euphemisms:

**Table 3.** Summary overview of the types of sense relations

1. POSITIVE EUPHEMISMS	2. NEGATIVE EUPHEMISMS
HYPONYM → HYPERONYM (6)	HYPONYM→HYPERONYM (11)
HYPERONYM→HYPONYM (5)	FIXED EXPRESSIONS (5)
FIXED EXPRESSIONS (4)	ANTONYMY (2)
CO-TAXONOMY (1)	HYPERONYM→HYPONYM (1)
SYNONYMS (1)	NON-LINEAR POLYSEMY (1)
OTHER CASES (3)	

As far as the relation of inclusion is concerned, the most frequent change of meaning in the first group of euphemisms is the transformation of a hyponym into a hyperonym (six cases), and the second most frequent change is the one where a hyperonym changes into a hyponym (five cases). In the second group, the transformation of the hyponym into a hyperonym is the most frequent change (eleven instances), whereas only one hyperonym→hyponym transformation was found. Also, only one case of non-linear polysemy was found in negative euphemisms. As for the relation of exclusion, one instance of incompatibility was found in the first group and two cases of antonymy in the second group.

These results show how meaning is transferred from direct expressions to euphemisms seen from the point of view of the language system, but, at the same time, the results give clues about how the meaning of euphemisms is understood in a particular context (euphemisms can have more general or more specific meanings). The next section of the paper will discuss pragmatic inferential processes underlying the interpretation of euphemisms.

## 3. PRAGMATICS OF EUPHEMISMS

### 3.1. Theoretical background

Although it is almost a cliché, it is important to emphasize that the meaning of words out of context is incomplete. This incompleteness is resolved when meaning is interpreted with regard to both linguistic and situational contexts.

Prčić (2008: 293–298) explains that pragmatic specialization involves two stages: a) reference assignment, when referents in the utterance are identified, and b) local sense disambiguation – the phase in which intended diagnostic features of words are inferred. There are two types of local disambiguation: the first type is the basic, obligatory level of inference which further includes two subtypes: reconstruction and construction. The second level refers to additional disambiguation, which also includes two subtypes, modulation and modification.

Reconstruction is the inferential process by virtue of which the communicator reconstructs the intended meaning by eliminating semantically available, but pragmatically and contextually inadequate meanings. This type of inference includes related senses (linear polysemy and non-linear polysemy) and non-related senses (complete and partial homonymy). Similarly to reconstruction, construction is a process which involves the elimination of semantically available and pragmatically inadequate meanings; however, construction refers to the process of inferring senses that are still not formalized into words and established in dictionaries.

The second level of additional disambiguation refers to modulation and modification. Modulation happens when an important diagnostic feature is separated and emphasized in a specific context. Modification is realized as strengthening (addition of diagnostic features to make the meaning more precise), weakening (removal of diagnostic features to make the meaning looser) or reversing (changing the central diagnostic features into their opposites). These pragmatic processes are responsible for creating senses that are still not listed in dictionaries.

### 3.2. Context

#### 3.2.1. Context independent and context dependent euphemisms

All euphemisms in the corpus can be classified into two groups. The first group consists of fixed expressions, whose meanings are not dependent on context, whereas the second group of euphemisms includes expressions that can be considered euphemistic only in a specific context:

**Table 4.** Context independent and context dependent euphemisms

CONTEXT INDEPENDENT EUPHEMISMS (selected examples)	CONTEXT DEPENDENT EUPHEMISMS (selected examples)
<b>make an honest woman of</b> – to marry a woman you have impregnated	<b>peace</b> – a preparation for violence
<b>golden years (the)</b> – old age	<b>health</b> – illness
<b>magic word (the)</b> – please	<b>collaborator</b> – traitor
<b>come to the attention of the police</b> – to be a habitual criminal	<b>absorption</b> – a military conquest
<b>the oldest profession</b> – prostitution	<b>organization</b> – a band of criminals
<b>give to God</b> – to commit (a child) to a priestly or monastic life	<b>mafia</b> – family
	<b>conflict</b> – war
	<b>financial assistance</b> – state aid for the poor
	<b>personal assistant</b> – secretary

It is clear that the second group of euphemisms is heavily dependent on context; for example, peace can be understood as its opposite, as a preparation for violence, only in a

specific context of use. For example, Holder (2002: 293) explains the euphemistic meaning of *peace*:

First noted in Hitler's notorious *peace speech* of 17 May, 1933, which heralded his assaults upon his neighbours. The concept and language were adopted by Communists and other aggressors, with *peace councils*, *offensives*, and the like:

Its official name was Operation Peace for Galilee, even though the siege of Beirut, far to the north of Galilee, had been going on for weeks. (Simpson, 1998, writing of the 1982 invasion of Lebanon by Israel)

*Peace-keeping action* is an invasion of another's territory, the units taking part being described as a *peace-keeping force*.

Another euphemism, *conflict*, means "...a strong disagreement or a single battle. It sounded better than war, especially when the Korean *conflict* burst upon us so soon after the Second World War " (Holder 2002: 80).

### 3.2.2. Reconstruction

Bearing in mind that certain euphemisms are euphemisms only in a specific context, the number one question is: what are the pragmatic inferential processes that can help us understand that a euphemism is a euphemism, that a word or phrase should not be taken at its face value?

The analysis of sense relations shows that hyponymy is the most frequent relation in the corpus. In positive euphemisms, there are six cases of hyponym→hyperonym change, and five cases of hyperonym→hyponym change. In negative euphemisms, the most frequent sense relation type is hyponym→hyperonym transfer (11 instances). Cruse (2004: 108) identifies hyponymy as a linear relation between senses, and Prčić (2008: 294–295) explains that reconstruction is an inferential process where meaning is inferred by means of discovering linear or non-linear relations between senses. Linear relations include narrowing (specializing) and broadening (generalizing) the meaning. If this theoretical explanation is applied to the corpus of euphemisms, it turns out that, in the largest number of analyzed cases, in order to understand what a euphemism really refers to, the meaning must be narrowed down to a more specific meaning, or broadened to a more general meaning. In positive euphemisms, in order to understand that the six hyperonyms are euphemisms, their meaning should be narrowed down to a more specific sense (eg. *working people* should be narrowed to *industrial workers*, *a personal assistant* should be narrowed down to *a secretary*, *a sanitary man* should be narrowed to *a cleaner of lavatories*). Negative euphemisms are even richer with euphemistic hyperonyms (11 examples) (eg. *conflict* should be specified and understood as *war*, *a collaborator* is *a traitor*, *the organization* is *a band of criminals*, *a family* is *mafia*).

There is one case of non-linear polysemy in negative euphemisms, *absorption* – *a military conquest*. The metaphor *absorption* can be reconstructed as *a military conquest* only in a specific context of use. Holder (2002: 2) gives the context in which the euphemism *absorption* is understood as *a military conquest* (by means of metaphorical extension): "These measures, together with the 'absorption' of the Baltic states in the north, advanced the western frontiers of the Soviet Union by hundreds of miles. (A. Clark, 1995, writing about the Russian seizure of eastern Poland in 1939)"



### 3.2.3. Modification

As it has already been stated, modification is a process in which meaning is constructed through the process of strengthening, weakening or reversing the diagnostic features of words in order to comply with contextual demands. Two examples of reversing were found in this research: *peace – a preparation for violence* and *health – illness*. The pragmatic process of reversing is to blame for the possibility to understand words or phrases as their antonyms, but the diagnostic features of words or phrases change into their opposite features only in a specific context. It is not possible to find antonyms listed as separate senses of words in dictionaries: for example, no dictionary enlists *illness* as a possible sense of the word *health*.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Although this analysis is based on a mini-corpus of 40 euphemisms, the results give some insight into the process of creating euphemisms:

- In negative euphemisms, there are eleven euphemistic hyperonyms, and only one case of a euphemistic hyponym, which means that euphemisms are most frequently superordinate expressions. In positive euphemisms, there are six euphemistic hyperonyms and five euphemistic hyponyms, which means that using superordinate expressions as euphemisms is the most frequent transfer of meaning in positive euphemisms, but not as frequent as it is in negative euphemisms.
- Five fixed expressions in negative euphemisms and four fixed expressions in positive euphemisms show that some euphemisms are not dependent on context because they have a fixed semantic content, and are more easily recognized as euphemisms (*make an honest woman of, the oldest profession, the magic word, the golden years*). On the other hand, many euphemisms can only be treated as such in a specific context (*organization, family, conflict*).
- Antonymy, the most radical reversal of meaning, was found in two cases in negative euphemisms. In positive euphemisms only one case of incompatibility was found.
- One case of metaphorical extension of meaning was found in negative euphemisms (*absorption – a military conquest*). No such cases were found among positive euphemisms.

These results point to the conclusion that negative euphemisms are less easy to recognize for three reasons:

1. They have more general meanings in eleven cases (out of 20 cases of negative euphemisms). They become superordinate expressions, which makes their meaning more general, therefore more vague. On the other hand, in positive euphemisms, superordinate euphemisms are less common, they were found in six cases (out of 20 positive euphemisms). In five cases they become hyponyms, which means they receive a more specific euphemistic meaning.
2. In negative euphemisms there are two cases of antonymy, the most radical change of meaning, which was not found in positive euphemisms. In positive euphemisms, only one case of incompatibility was found, but this was an instance of co-taxonomy, where no broadening or reversing of the meaning is present.

3. In negative euphemisms, one case of non-linear polysemy was found (*absorption* – a *military conquest*), and in positive euphemisms non-linear polysemy was not found. The metaphor *absorption* can be understood as a *military conquest* in the given context by means of the pragmatic inferential process of meaning reconstruction.

If we accept Holder's (2002: vi) view that euphemistic language can be "the language of evasion, of hypocrisy, of prudery, and of deceit", then it goes without saying that it is not always easy to recognize euphemisms. In case of positive euphemisms, this can be harmless, and even desirable. However, in case of negative euphemisms, whose mission is to make unpleasant things sound more bearable by means of extending, narrowing or reversing the meaning of non-euphemized expressions, negative connotations can sometimes be not only diminished but also completely disguised. This mind game can be dangerous because we may fail to understand the real meaning of words. Fortunately, pragmatic inferential processes make it possible to avoid confusions and misunderstandings whenever we are exposed to potentially manipulative language.

#### REFERENCES

1. Allan, K. and K. Burridge (2006), *Forbidden Words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2. Atkins, B.T.S. and M. Rundell (2008), *The Oxford Guide to Practical Lexicography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
3. Cruse, A (2004), *Meaning in Language: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
4. Holder, R.W. (2002), *How Not to Say What You Mean: A Dictionary of Euphemisms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
5. Prčić, T. (2008), "Leksičko značenje između semantičke nepotpunosti i pragmatičkog upotpunjenja", In: Radovanović M. i P. Piper (ur.), *Semantička proučavanja srpskog jezika*. Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti (Odeljenje jezika i književnosti – Srpski jezik u svetlu savremenih lingvističkih teorija 2), Beograd: pp. 291-300.
6. Rawson, H. (1981), *A Dictionary of Euphemisms and Other Doubletalk*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc.

## ISKAZIVANJE VREDNOSTI U POZITIVNIM I NEGATIVNIM EUFEMIZMIMA

**Milica Radulović**

*Rad analizira načine iskazivanja vrednosti u pozitivnim i negativnim eufemizmima. Istraživanje obuhvata 40 eufemizama, 20 eufemizama kojima se ističu pozitivne vrednosti i 20 eufemizama kojima se ublažavaju negativne vrednosti njihovih ekvivalenata, ekscerpiranih iz rečnika eufemizama How Not to Say What You Mean: A Dictionary of Euphemisms (Holder 2002). Rad najpre proučava smisaone odnose (između eufemizama i njihovih ekvivalenata) koji mogu objasniti načine na koje se prenosi značenje od izraza koji je direktan ili uvredljiv do eufemistične reči ili fraze koja je manje direktna ili manje uvredljiva. Rezultati ove analize su polazna tačka ka daljoj analizi pragmatičkih procesa koji učestvuju u interpretaciji značenja eufemizama i na osnovu kojih se može dovesti u vezu značenje eufemizma, kojim se namerno izbegava korišćenje direktnijeg izraza, i odgovarajućeg direktnog izraza.*

Ključne reči: *eufemizmi, negativni eufemizmi, pozitivni eufemizmi, smisaoni odnosi, pragmatička inferencija*