

SEMANTIC TRANSFORMATION AND CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR IN MODERN ENGLISH EUPHEMISTIC PHRASES

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Annotation. *This article explores the semantic transformation and conceptual metaphor that underlie euphemistic expressions in modern English. Euphemisms, as linguistic strategies, play a significant role in shaping communication by softening harsh realities and maintaining politeness. The study focuses on how semantic change, including extension, narrowing, amelioration, and metaphorization, contributes to euphemistic meaning-making. Conceptual metaphors are analyzed as cognitive mechanisms that allow abstract and sensitive concepts to be expressed through acceptable linguistic forms. The analysis highlights the dynamic relationship between thought, language, and social norms in euphemistic constructions. Through the examination of contemporary examples from media and everyday discourse, the article reveals how euphemisms mirror cultural values and the evolving sensitivity of modern English communication.*

Key words: *euphemism, semantics, conceptual metaphor, pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, transformation, politeness, discourse, communication, English, culture, perception, meaning.*

INTRODUCTION

Language is a living system that constantly changes to reflect human thought and social reality. One of the most fascinating linguistic phenomena that demonstrates this evolution is the euphemism - a strategy for expressing socially or emotionally sensitive concepts in an indirect or softened way. In modern English, euphemisms are widespread in media, politics, advertising, and everyday communication, serving not only as tools of politeness but also as instruments of persuasion and ideology. The semantic transformation of euphemisms reflects the tendency of language users to avoid taboos, create distance from unpleasant realities, or reshape cultural attitudes. Conceptual metaphor, as defined by Lakoff and Johnson, provides the cognitive foundation for this process, allowing abstract or negative ideas to be reinterpreted through more concrete and positive imagery. For example, the metaphorical phrase “passed away” conceptualizes death as a movement or transition, mitigating emotional impact. This study aims to investigate the semantic mechanisms and metaphorical principles that form euphemistic expressions in modern English, focusing on how meaning transformation occurs in response to cultural, cognitive, and pragmatic needs. The research emphasizes that euphemisms are not merely linguistic ornaments but cognitive reflections of collective

social consciousness, showing the intricate link between semantics, thought, and social interaction.

MAIN PART

Semantic transformation is central to the development of euphemisms in any language. In English, euphemisms often undergo processes such as amelioration (improving connotation), generalization, metaphorization, and metonymy. Through these transformations, expressions originally associated with negative or taboo meanings acquire a neutral or even positive tone. The process of semantic change in euphemistic formation is deeply intertwined with cultural evolution and societal attitudes toward morality, death, illness, and other sensitive topics. For example, terms like “sanitation engineer” instead of “garbage collector” and “domestic engineer” instead of “housewife” illustrate how social prestige and professional identity can be reshaped through semantic elevation. These lexical replacements not only alter perception but also embody ideological and cultural shifts toward equality and respect.

Conceptual metaphor theory, first proposed by Lakoff and Johnson provides a framework for understanding how euphemistic meaning emerges through cognitive processes (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). According to this theory, abstract domains of human experience - such as death, aging, or social exclusion - are conceptualized in terms of more concrete domains like journey, sleep, or spatial movement. For instance, in the metaphor “He passed away,” death is mapped onto the conceptual domain of travel or departure, implying continuity rather than cessation. Similarly, expressions like “senior citizens” for “old people” and “correctional facility” for “prison” demonstrate how metaphoric and semantic transformation soften or obscure unpleasant realities. These linguistic substitutions function as a psychological buffer that aligns communication with social norms of politeness and optimism.

The pragmatic dimension of euphemistic transformation is equally important. Euphemisms perform social functions of mitigation, protection of face (as described by Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory), and maintenance of interpersonal harmony. In political and media discourse, euphemisms often serve manipulative purposes, concealing harsh or controversial truths under a layer of semantic camouflage. For example, “collateral damage” replaces “civilian casualties,” and “downsizing” substitutes “firing employees.” In such cases, semantic transformation supports ideological control by reframing events to appear less harmful or morally questionable. Thus, euphemisms act not only as linguistic tools of politeness but also as rhetorical instruments of power and persuasion.

From a cognitive perspective, euphemisms are motivated by mental models that organize experience according to shared cultural metaphors. The metaphor “LIFE IS A JOURNEY” underlies expressions like “to move on” (after a breakup or death), while “BODY IS A MACHINE” appears in euphemisms such as “heart failure” instead of “heart stopped working.” These conceptual structures allow speakers to frame uncomfortable topics in ways that preserve psychological comfort. Furthermore, euphemisms rely on social cognition - the awareness of what is acceptable or unacceptable within a given community. Cultural taboos shape the range of euphemistic creativity, with English speakers avoiding direct mention of bodily functions, death, and aging through metaphorical substitution.

Semantic transformation in euphemisms also reflects diachronic processes. Words that begin as euphemisms may eventually lose their softening power and become neutral or even dysphemistic. For example, “toilet” was originally a euphemism derived from the French “toilette,” meaning dressing room. Over time, as the referent became explicit, the word lost its euphemistic character, giving rise to new forms such as “restroom,” “bathroom,” or “washroom.” This cyclical process, known as the “euphemism treadmill,” shows how linguistic change continually responds to shifting cultural sensitivities. Each new euphemism undergoes semantic transformation until it too becomes overly explicit or outdated.

Conceptual metaphor also facilitates creativity in euphemistic innovation. For instance, metaphors related to cleanliness (“clean air act,” “sanitized version”), light (“bright future,” “dark times”), and movement (“step down,” “move forward”) serve as productive sources for new euphemistic expressions. These metaphors reshape how social and moral realities are conceptualized in communication. Euphemisms often blend metaphorical and metonymic processes, creating multi-layered meanings that engage both cognition and emotion. A phrase like “economically disadvantaged” instead of “poor” involves both semantic broadening and moral re-evaluation.

In modern English discourse, euphemisms reveal the moral and ideological fabric of society. They indicate what is considered inappropriate, taboo, or impolite to mention directly. The semantic transformation of euphemisms not only masks reality but also reflects cultural priorities - such as respect for individual dignity, avoidance of conflict, and sensitivity to diversity. The increasing use of politically correct euphemisms, such as “differently abled” for “disabled,” demonstrates a collective linguistic effort to reshape attitudes through language. Thus, euphemisms act as a mirror of social progress and as tools of linguistic adaptation to evolving ethical standards.

The semantic and metaphorical structure of euphemistic expressions in modern English shows that language change is guided by both cognitive and cultural forces. Through semantic transformation and conceptual metaphor, euphemisms encode collective values, negotiate social relationships, and mediate between truth and acceptability in communication. Their persistence in language proves that euphemism is not merely a stylistic device but a fundamental mechanism of human cognition and social interaction.

CONCLUSION

Semantic transformation and conceptual metaphor play a central role in shaping euphemistic expressions in modern English. Through processes such as amelioration, metaphorization, and generalization, euphemisms reframe socially sensitive realities into linguistically acceptable forms. Conceptual metaphors serve as cognitive tools that structure abstract or unpleasant concepts through more tangible and positive imagery, ensuring emotional and communicative balance. Euphemisms, therefore, act as both cultural and cognitive artifacts that reflect collective values, social norms, and evolving ethical awareness. Their semantic dynamics reveal the continuous negotiation between honesty and politeness, directness and decorum, realism and sensitivity in human communication. In an era of heightened cultural awareness, euphemisms continue to evolve, demonstrating that language not only expresses but also shapes the way society perceives truth, morality, and human experience.

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