Anna Wira

The pre-cognitive view on euphemism among English

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1. Introduction

There are many works devoted to euphemisms both in English/American and Polish literature. They have been mainly approached from two perspectives: either lexical fields (often presented in a form of euphemism dictionaries) or ways of euphemisms formation have been analysed. Since euphemisms are closely connected with the culture of a given country, both English/American and Polish authors have been trying to define the phenomenon mainly in the scope of their linguistic environments. Apart from providing the definition of euphemism and discussing the most typical characteristics of the phenomenon, linguists researching the problem have addressed the question whether euphemism is a positive or negative issue.

2. Euphemism as perceived by English/American and Polish linguists

The problem with setting clear boundaries to the definition of euphemism is dealt with by scholars who struggle to come up with their own definitions. Some of them approach the issue from the purely linguistic point of view. Brook[1] for instance, declares that it is "the figure of speech by which one seeks to disguise the real nature of an unpleasant idea

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[1] G. L. Brook, *A History of the English Language*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1958, p. 181.

by giving it an inoffensive name." Neaman and Silver[2] account for it in a following way: "euphemizing is generally defined as substituting an inoffensive or pleasant term for a more explicit, offensive one, thereby veneering the truth by using kind words." Spears[3] defines euphemism as "a relatively mild or vague phrase substituted for a harsh or specific word or phrase, or the process of making such substitutions." Worth notifying is the fact that Brook's description introduces additionally an element of evaluation of the phenomenon when he writes about disguising "the real nature of an unpleasant idea". Interestingly, an evaluative approach is also presented by Neaman and Silver when they put forward an idea of "veneering the truth by using kind words". Disguising the real nature and veneering the truth have negative associations, hence the whole process of euphemizing may be perceived as an unpleasant, troublesome and embarrassing one.

Apart from proposing definitions of euphemism, some of the linguists focus on extralinguistic reasons for its formation. Fromkin and Rodman[4] for instance, characterize the phenomenon as "a word or phrase that replaces a taboo word, or that is used in the attempt to avoid either fearful or unpleasant subjects." Ayto[5] defines it as "the set of communicative strategies we have evolved to refer to a topic under a taboo, without actually contravening its terms." It should be noted though that taboo is only one of many extralinguistic factors taken into consideration while describing euphemism. That is why some authors, for example Dąbrowska[6] attempt to provide more universal features characterizing the aspect of language. Hence, according to Dąbrowska every linguistic substitution of a word, expression or phrase which for whatever reason cannot be introduced into a discourse is a euphemism. In another definition the linguist[7] explains that it is a linguistic phenomenon which has come into existence because of extra linguistic reasons. It is a substitution name used instead of a direct name which cannot be used because of negative connotations. Euphemistic expression should bring about positive or neutral connotations.

On the other hand, Cobb[8] focuses on the principal purpose of euphemism which for him is "to present a situation, a person or an object in a more agreeable, more reassuring or politer light than would be afforded by the hard glare of reality or by crude, direct definition." Alternatively, Bolinger[9] attracts the reader's attention to the fact that "euphemism is not restricted to the lexicon: there are grammatical ways of toning something down without actually changing the content of the message". Such an approach aiming at not

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2   J. Neaman, C. Silver, *A dictionary of euphemisms*, Hamish Hamilton Limited, London, 1983, p. 1.

3   R. A. Spears, *Slang and Euphemism*, New American Library, New York, 2001, p. XXIV.

4   V. Fromkin, R. Rodman, *An Introduction to Language*, CBS College Publishing Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Japan, 1983, p. 267.

5   J. Ayto, *Wobbly Bits and other euphemisms*, A&C Black Publishers, London, 2007, p. 5.

6   A. Dąbrowska, *Kwalifikowanie eufemizmów przez niektóre współczesne słowniki języka polskiego*, [In:] Anusiewicz J., Bartmiński J. (eds.), *Język a kultura*, t. 1, *Podstawowe pojęcia i problemy*, Wiedza o Kulturze, Wrocław, 1991, p. 131.

7   A. Dąbrowska, *Słownik eufemizmów polskich czyli w rzeczy mocno, w sposobie łagodnie*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa, 2005, p. 11.

8   R. Cobb, *Euphemism and Argot in France*, [In:] Enright D. J. (ed.), *Fair of Speech: The Uses of Euphemism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985, p. 72.

9   D. Bolinger, *Aspects of Language*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1981, p. 148.

only what a euphemism is but as well how it is formed, is present among both Polish and English/ American writers.

On the whole, the above definitions do not bring any progress into defining the phenomenon, they do not discover any novel features and they mainly focus on the characteristics provided by dictionary entries.

A fresher look on the aspect of language is offered by Allan and Burridge[10] who introduce an idea of avoiding possible loss of face. According to the authors, a euphemism "is used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face: either one's own face or, through giving offense, that of the audience, or of some third party." Warren[11] as well provides a novel approach when she characterizes the phenomenon from the interpreter's point of view. She states that "we have a euphemism if the interpreter perceives the use of some word or expression as evidence of a wish on the part of the speaker to denote some sensitive phenomenon in a tactful and/or veiled manner." For Allan and Burridge a decision so as not to use a euphemism may result in "possible loss of face". Such a point of view has not been presented so far. Furthermore, the "possible loss of face" involves not only a direct user such as a speaker or a hearer but also "some third party". This fact introduces a new perspective, since, although it has been described how euphemism influences a speaker or a listener, the influence of the phenomenon on "some other party" has not been researched in previous definitions. Warren's definition is likewise of great importance on the grounds that we realize that whether a euphemism is really perceived as a euphemism, that is, whether it is able to fulfill its function, depends on the linguistic competence of an interpreter.

All in all, only Allan and Burridge's and Warren's analyses offer some original and valuable insight into the phenomenon. They expand the understanding of the whole process of euphemizing. Other authors mentioned above do not seem to introduce any new concepts, their definitions consist in characteristics presented by dictionary definitions.

Euphemism seems to be one of the few linguistic issues that results in a lively controversy among its researchers. Apart from focusing on the linguistic aspect of the phenomenon, authors pay attention to its cultural, psychological, social, etc. significance. The comparative analysis of the definitions proves that euphemisms really stir emotions. The researchers analyzing the phenomenon from this perspective can be divided into two groups: those who sympathize with it, and those who are definitively against it.

The list of authors who view euphemism as a positive and useful phenomenon is definitely shorter than the list of their opponents. Thus, Williams[12] defines it as the process of replacing a word evoking negative associations, or an expression which is not socially acceptable with its more suitable linguistic counterpart. The author understands it as improving the process of communication when difficult issues are being discussed. A

[10] K. Allan, K. Burridge, *Euphemism and Dysphemism: Language used as shield and weapon*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991, p. 11.
[11] B. Warren, *What euphemisms tell us about the interpretation of words*. "Studia Linguistica" Vol. 46 Issue 2, 1992, pp. 128–172.
[12] J. Williams, *Origins of the English Language: A Social and Linguistic History*, The Free Press, New York, 1975, p. 198.

comparable opinion is held by Leech[13] for whom euphemism is "the linguistic equivalent of disinfectant" – so it is a substance which is used for cleaning all the linguistic impurities that may negatively influence our frame of mind. In turn, according to Asher and Simpson[14] euphemism "provides a way of speaking about the unspeakable". It is not a completely positive concept since it "falls midway between transparent discourse and total prohibition." Total prohibition seems to be a scary idea taking into consideration all totalitarian states, even if we talk about "linguistic dictatorship", which in a sense can be very close to censorship. Somehow, it turns out that the process of euphemizing may be connected with limiting the speaker's linguistic freedom. Nevertheless, Asher and Simpson conclude that "it is also the would-be safe area of language, constrained by decorum." The feeling of being safe is generally considered as a positive one. Since euphemisms offer their users the desirable feeling of linguistic safety, even though it is related to a constraint resulting from decorum, they cannot be described as a negative feature of language.

Another writer who perceives a positive aspect of using euphemism is Enright[15] (2005: 8–9). He declares that it "has enabled many to discuss or at least refer to things they would otherwise not feel able even to mention." On the other hand Enright is aware that although euphemism is a mild term used in the place of one considered taboo and it has been extended to replace any term regarded as distasteful or vulgar "in some cases the extension has been carried too far and has become the object of ridicule and satire". Two important aspects are introduced in his definition: (i) the positive aim of using euphemism such as, for instance, avoiding hurting feelings, can be replaced with a questionable purpose that is misleading the listener with politically correct language, (ii) euphemistic term may be introduced not only to hide objectionable words but what is more important, unpleasant ideas.

Considering the definitions, my position would be that it is possible to compare euphemism to a surgical scalpel. The tool in an experienced hand may save life, in the case of an unprepared one it may cause harm. Euphemism is a neutral phenomenon. The speaker responsible for coining or using it and the reason for introducing it into the discourse decide whether it has a power to heal people's emotions or to mislead their minds.

As indicated earlier, the majority of authors dealing with the problem regard euphemism as a negative and deceitful phenomenon. Lewis[16] for instance, is one of those who does not have any lenience for euphemistic terms. He perceives them as "the comic villains of the language". The above point of view is shared by Marckwardt[17] who describes euphemism as "verbal prudery". Enright[18] sees it as a situation when "sweet words dance hand in hand with dreadful facts." Correspondingly, for Mullen[19] it is "a sign of a retreat

13   G. Leech, *Semantics*, Penguin Books Ltd, London, 1976, p. 53.
14   R. Asher, J. Simpson, *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistic*, Vol. 3, Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1994, p. 1181.
15   D. J. Enright (ed.), *Fair of Speech: The Uses of Euphemism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985, pp. 8–9.
16   J. Lewis, *In the office*, [In:] Enright D. J. (ed.), *Fair of Speech: The Uses of Euphemism*, Oxford University Press., Oxford, 1985, p. 92.
17   A. H. Marckwardt, *American English*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1958, p. 122.
18   D. J. Enright (ed.), *Fair of Speech: The Uses of Euphemism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985, p. 122.
19   P. Mullen, *The Religious Speak–Easy*, [In:] Enright D. J. (ed.), *Fair of Speech: The Uses of Euphemism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985, p. 163.

from what is solid, tangible and everyday to something like misplaced reticence and the indirectness which separates man and the world." In accordance with the above opinions, Rees[20] defines it as "business of *not* calling a spade a spade."

Additionally, on the grounds that euphemism is used for dealing with taboo or sensitive subjects, Holder[21] labels it as "the language of evasion, hypocrisy, prudery, and deceit."

In the light of the above, the question might arise why the particular facet of language provokes so much disagreement among researchers. I would argue that the problem with the facet of language use is related to the fact that whether euphemism is used with good intentions or it is introduced to deceive, it is employed to manipulate emotions and distort our perception of reality. Presumably, for this reason the authors present such contradictory views and assume either appreciative or derogative attitude towards the problem under investigation.

3. The problem of classification

On the basis of the definitions presented so far, the following, preliminary definition of euphemism could be postulated:

A euphemism is a linguistic phenomenon (word, expression, phrase) which comes into language due to extralinguistic reasons such as cultural, social or religious rules, which require obeying (avoiding taboo, hiding secret names based on the idea that words have the power to bring good or bad fortune, concealing the truth in the speaker's interest, paying attention to the interlocutor's feelings and emotions). It is a substitution of a word, an expression or a phrase which has negative connotations either for a speaker or for a listener, with a word, an expression or a phrase which has neutral or (more) positive connotations.

Needless to say, accepting this definition has specific implications: most words, expressions, phrases can be categorized as euphemisms due to the fact that the qualification depends not on the word used, but mainly on the context of the current discourse, the speaker's aim, the level of general education and linguistic competence of the interlocutors as well as their empathy and emotional maturity. Milder equivalents of words, expressions and phrases can be qualified as euphemisms. Even vulgar expressions and swear words can be perceived as euphemisms since the "weaker" swear word can replace the "stronger" one. A word can be identified as a euphemism only in a particular context, "what is euphemistic in one context may be taboo in another"[22].

The authors also point to the problem of subjectivity while choosing entries to the dictionaries of euphemisms, and explain what criteria are taken into consideration while accepting a word into the dictionary. Ayto in the introduction explains that "only those lexical items are included that genuinely represent an attempt to avoid a word that would

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20   N. Rees, *A man about a dog. Euphemisms & Other Examples of Verbal Squeamishness*, Harper Collins Publishers, London, 2008, p. V.
21   R. W. Holder, *A Dictionary of Euphemisms*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2008, p. VII.
22   J. Ayto, *Wobbly Bits and other euphemisms*, A&C Black Publishers, London, 2007, p. 13.

give offence or seem too frank". Correspondingly, Rees[23] declares that "As will be obvious there is plenty of scope for debate on the qualification of individual words and phrases for inclusion in this book of euphemisms". He decides to exclude words which are a roundabout way of saying something, especially if it is a slang alternative. Nevertheless, he also finds it difficult to draw a borderline. In the introduction to the *Dictionary of euphemisms* Holder[24] admits that his way of selecting euphemisms is of necessity subjective. He also points out to the phenomenon of linguistic pejoration, the process described by Steven Pinker as euphemism treadmill, where expressions used as euphemisms lose their euphemistic value and they acquire the negative connotations of the word they replace, they undergo the process of growth, development and decline.

4. Conclusion

Recapitulating, the majority of scholars include in their definitions of euphemism features which are present in the dictionary sources. As indicated earlier, they characterize it as a linguistic phenomenon which comes into language due to extralinguistic reasons. It is a substitution of a word, an expression or a phrase which has negative connotations either for a speaker or for a listener, with a word, an expression or a phrase which has neutral or (more) positive connotations.

Only Allan and Burridge's and Warren's analyses expand the understanding of the whole process of euphemizing. Nevertheless, even their approach cannot be classified as a completely novel one, since their findings[25] can be in general classified as paying attention to the interlocutor's feelings and emotions.

Linguists studying the phenomenon of euphemism have not been able to reach the consensus whether it is a positive or negative phenomenon. There is a group of scholars, who claim that euphemisms establish better relationship between interlocutors. Their opinion may be represented by Burchfield[26] who declares that "a language without euphemism would be a defective instrument of communication". This view is opposed by others, for instance Murphy[27], in whose opinion "a truly healthy and psychologically mature society would have no need for euphemisms". George Orwell[28] criticizes especially political euphemism which "is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind." It is generally agreed though that while introducing euphemisms useful for some people to talk about uncomfortable or unpleas-

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[23] N. Rees, *A man about a dog. Euphemisms & Other Examples of Verbal Squeamishness*, Harper Collins Publishers, London, 2008, p. VI.

[24] R. W. Holder, *A Dictionary of Euphemisms*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2008, p. VII.

[25] Allan and Burridge write about "possible loss of face" involving not only a direct user such as a speaker or hearer but also "some third party"; Warren characterizes the phenomenon from the interpreter's point of view.

[26] R. Burchfield, *An Outline History of Euphemisms in English*, [In:] Enright D. J. (ed.), *Fair of Speech: The Uses of Euphemism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985, p. 29.

[27] C. Murphy, *The E Word*, "The Atlantic Monthly" September 1996, Vol. 278, No.3, pp. 16–18.

[28] G. Orwell, *Politics and the English Language*, [In:] *Shooting an elephant and other Essays*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1950, p. 56.

ant facts of their lives, such as death of their loved ones, may seem to be justified, there are some euphemisms coined only to manipulate and be used like slogans by sociologists and politicians to hide difficult situations.

Another question which has not been solved so far is how to decide whether a word or an expression is or is not a euphemism. There are not clear criteria, and a decision whether to classify a word as euphemistic has to be taken by a particular author only on the basis of his/her subjective judgement. For the above mentioned reasons it can be claimed that a word acquires its euphemistic value only in a particular situation. The context is the main force lying behind defining the word as a euphemistic one.

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