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EUPHEMISMS IN MEDIA DISCOURSE AND THEIR ROLE IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION

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Abstract: This theoretical article examines the role of euphemisms in media discourse and their potential influence on public opinion. Drawing on pragmatics, politeness theory, framing, and critical discourse analysis, it explores how euphemistic expressions soften sensitive information, construct particular interpretations of events, and sometimes obscure responsibility. The article argues that euphemisms have a dual function: they can promote respectful communication, but they can also reduce transparency and influence public understanding. Critical media literacy is therefore essential for evaluating euphemistic language in contemporary journalism.

Keywords: Euphemism, media discourse, public opinion, framing, political communication, linguistic manipulation, critical discourse analysis.

Introduction

Language plays a central role in the way people understand social, political, and economic events. Through newspapers, television broadcasts, online news platforms, and social media, information is communicated to audiences whose interpretations may be influenced by vocabulary, sentence structure, metaphors, and the selection of particular details. Consequently, media discourse does more than report events: it can also frame the ways in which those events are understood.

One linguistic device that contributes to this process is the euphemism. A euphemism is a word or expression used in place of another expression considered unpleasant, offensive, embarrassing, or socially sensitive. Although euphemisms are common in everyday communication, their use in media discourse deserves particular attention because the wording of a news report may influence how readers evaluate an event, institution, public figure, or social problem.

Euphemisms can serve constructive purposes. They may reduce unnecessary offence, respect the dignity of individuals, and facilitate communication about subjects such as illness, death, disability, and economic hardship. However, they may also make harmful actions sound less serious, present unpopular decisions in a favourable light, or shift attention away from those responsible for an event. Allan and Burridge (1991) demonstrate the importance of examining euphemism in relation to its more offensive counterpart, dysphemism, while research on political

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discourse highlights the strategic use of euphemistic expressions in public communication (Crespo-Fernández, 2018).

The relationship between euphemism and media influence is especially relevant in political journalism, where wording can affect the perceived legitimacy of government decisions, military actions, and economic policies. Nazarenko and Kozel (2024), for example, examine euphemisms in English-language media coverage of the 2024 United States elections. Their discussion illustrates how metaphor, circumlocution, generalization, and other linguistic strategies contribute to the presentation of political events.

This article aims to explain the theoretical relationship between euphemism, media discourse, and public opinion. It argues that the significance of a euphemism depends on its communicative context, the information it emphasizes or obscures, and the interpretive framework through which audiences encounter it. Euphemisms do not automatically manipulate readers; their influence depends on how they are used and understood in context.

Methodology

Theoretical Understanding of Euphemism

Euphemism is a linguistic and pragmatic phenomenon in which a speaker or writer selects an indirect or less emotionally harsh expression instead of a more direct alternative. The choice may be motivated by politeness, cultural expectations, social sensitivity, professional conventions, or a desire to manage the audience's reaction.

Allan and Burridge (1991) conceptualize euphemism and dysphemism as related forms of linguistic choice that can function as a shield or a weapon in communication. Euphemism may protect an interlocutor from embarrassment or offence, whereas dysphemism uses a deliberately harsh or disparaging expression. Neither category can always be identified from the words alone: context, communicative intention, and social interpretation are essential.

For example, the expression passed away is commonly used instead of died in circumstances where a speaker wishes to communicate bad news gently. In a similar way, workforce restructuring may be used in an organizational announcement instead of the more direct expression job cuts. The first substitution may primarily serve a social purpose, while the second may present an economically or professionally difficult decision in less negative terms.

Nevertheless, a distinction must be made between tactful language and misleading language. A considerate expression does not necessarily conceal information, just as a technical term does not automatically constitute a euphemism. The classification depends on whether the expression softens the meaning of an otherwise relevant alternative and what interpretive consequences that substitution creates.

Burridge (2012) also emphasizes the relationship between euphemism, language change, and shifting social conventions. Terms considered acceptable in one historical or cultural context may become inappropriate in another. This makes euphemism a dynamic phenomenon rather than a fixed category of vocabulary.

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In media discourse, the analysis must therefore consider not only dictionary meanings but also the relationship between words, social values, institutional practices, and the circumstances in which information is communicated.

Theoretical Approaches to Euphemism in Media Discourse

Pragmatics and politeness theory

Pragmatics examines how meaning is constructed through language in particular communicative situations. A sentence may convey more than its literal meaning because the speaker chooses an indirect expression, relies on shared knowledge, or expects the audience to infer an unstated message.

Grice's (1975) account of conversational implicature helps explain how people derive implied meanings from language. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, meanwhile, describes how speakers manage face—the socially valued public image of themselves and others—during interaction.

These perspectives are useful for understanding why euphemisms occur in journalism. A report concerning illness, death, poverty, or social disadvantage may employ indirect wording to reduce emotional discomfort or avoid unnecessarily stigmatizing individuals. In this context, euphemism can support considerate and socially responsible communication.

However, the same indirectness may also reduce precision. When a media report describes a serious event using vague or abstract language, the audience may receive less information about its consequences than a more direct formulation would provide. Pragmatic analysis therefore asks not only why a particular expression was chosen but also what its readers are likely to infer from it.

Framing theory

Framing provides another important perspective for understanding the relationship between euphemisms and public opinion.

Entman (1993) explains framing as a process through which communication selects certain aspects of perceived reality and makes them more salient. Such selection can influence how audiences define a problem, identify its causes, evaluate its consequences, and consider possible responses.

Euphemisms can participate in this process by directing attention toward one interpretation rather than another.

For instance, the expression collateral damage may describe civilian harm associated with military action. Compared with a more explicit reference to civilian deaths or injuries, the expression can shift the audience's attention towards an operational or administrative category rather than the human consequences of the event.

Similarly, the term downsizing can present employment reductions as an organizational process, whereas job cuts places greater emphasis on the direct consequences for workers.

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These alternatives are not always interchangeable, and their appropriateness depends on the facts being reported. Nevertheless, they illustrate how lexical choice can affect the focus of a message.

The central implication of framing theory is that euphemisms may influence which aspects of an event become prominent in the reader's understanding. They do not necessarily determine what readers believe, but they can contribute to the interpretive context in which opinions are formed.

Discussion analysis

Critical discourse analysis examines the relationships between language, power, ideology, and social institutions. Fairclough (1995) emphasizes the importance of examining media language within the wider social conditions in which texts are produced, circulated, and interpreted.

From this perspective, euphemisms may reveal how institutions represent their own actions and interests. A government, corporation, or political organization may prefer terminology that emphasizes efficiency, stability, responsibility, or public benefit. Journalists may reproduce such terminology when reporting statements by institutional sources, even when alternative wording would highlight different aspects of the situation.

Orwell's (1946) essay Politics and the English Language offers a classic critique of political language that obscures unpleasant realities through vague or misleading expressions. His discussion remains relevant to the analysis of euphemistic language because it highlights the relationship between linguistic clarity and the ability to recognize the consequences of political decisions.

Critical discourse analysis does not require assuming that every euphemism is intentionally deceptive. Instead, it encourages readers to investigate whose language is being used, which interests it may serve, what information it includes, and which details it leaves unclear.

Together, pragmatics, framing theory, and critical discourse analysis provide a theoretical foundation for examining euphemisms as linguistic choices with social and interpretive consequences.

The Main Functions of Euphemisms in Media Discourse

Euphemisms perform several functions in contemporary media communication. Their effects vary according to the topic, audience, and surrounding information.

Softening sensitive information

One of the most common functions of euphemism is to communicate unpleasant information in a more considerate manner. News reports about death, serious illness, disability, and personal hardship may use indirect or carefully selected expressions to avoid unnecessary distress.

In this context, euphemistic language may contribute to respectful journalism by acknowledging the emotional circumstances of the people being discussed. A report about a bereaved family, for example, may avoid unnecessarily harsh wording while still providing an accurate description of the event.

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However, sensitive communication should not come at the expense of clarity. If the wording prevents readers from understanding what actually happened, the social benefit of softening the message may be outweighed by the loss of information.

Constructing favourable representations of political actions

Political communication is a particularly important context for euphemism because public officials and institutions often seek to explain decisions that may be controversial or unpopular.

Expressions such as enhanced interrogation, security operation, and collateral damage can frame difficult or harmful events through technical, administrative, or strategic terminology. Depending on the circumstances, these expressions may shift attention away from coercion, violence, or human suffering.

The term enhanced interrogation, for example, has been used in political debates to describe interrogation practices that critics characterize as torture. The difference between the expressions is consequential because the first presents the practice through institutional terminology, while the second explicitly foregrounds the alleged abuse. The accuracy of either label must be assessed against the specific conduct and relevant legal context.

Crespo-Fernández (2018) examines euphemism as a discursive strategy in United States local and state politics. His analysis identifies its use in positive self-presentation, socially acceptable criticism, and the concealment of unsettling or controversial topics. Such work illustrates why political language should be examined in context rather than accepted as a neutral description of events.

Framing economic difficulties

Economic journalism frequently uses expressions that describe difficult circumstances in abstract or administrative terms.

For example, downsizing may be used instead of job cuts, while economic adjustment may refer to a series of policy changes whose practical effects differ across social groups. Such expressions can foreground managerial decisions or broader economic processes rather than the experiences of affected workers and families.

Mironina and Porchesku (2023) discuss economic euphemisms among several categories identified in English-language political media discourse. They emphasize that euphemistic expressions may reduce the apparent seriousness of economic and social problems or direct attention towards proposed responses rather than the difficulties themselves. Their analysis concerns a specific body of media material, so it should not be taken as proof that every use of administrative economic terminology is misleading.

Economic terminology may be necessary for accuracy, especially when a phrase has a defined technical meaning. The critical question is whether a report provides enough detail for readers to understand the real implications of the situation.

Promoting respect and reducing stigma

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Euphemisms can also contribute to respectful representation by avoiding language that unnecessarily humiliates or marginalizes individuals.

For example, people experiencing homelessness foregrounds a person's circumstances rather than defining the individual entirely through a social condition. Depending on the audience and context, such wording may encourage a more person-centred interpretation.

However, it is important not to classify all inclusive or respectful language as manipulative euphemism. Some terminology reflects genuine efforts to avoid discrimination, and a more direct alternative may itself be stigmatizing. The aim of critical analysis should be to evaluate accuracy, dignity, and context rather than to reject indirect wording simply because it is indirect.

Nazarenko and Kozel (2024) discuss euphemism in the context of social sensitivity and political media discourse, demonstrating that its functions extend beyond the concealment of negative information. The same linguistic strategy may help to prevent offence in one situation and obscure a serious problem in another.

Research Linguistic Strategies Used to Create Euphemistic Effects

Euphemistic effects can be achieved through several linguistic mechanisms.

Metaphor replaces a direct description with a figurative expression. Depending on the context, a metaphor may make a situation easier to discuss or shift attention away from its literal consequences.

Generalization uses a broad expression instead of a more specific description. For example, referring to an incident without explaining that it involved a serious injury may leave readers with an incomplete understanding of the event.

Circumlocution uses a longer phrase instead of a direct word or expression. This may help explain a sensitive issue carefully, but it can also make straightforward information harder to identify.

Abstraction and technical terminology present actions through administrative or professional categories. Expressions such as operational losses or workforce restructuring may foreground institutional processes while making personal consequences less visible.

Acronyms and abbreviations can create distance between a reader and the meaning of a message, particularly when the audience is unfamiliar with the terminology. In political communication, they may also evoke associations with a particular party, movement, or institution.

Nazarenko and Kozel (2024) identify metaphor as the most frequent mechanism in their limited sample of CNN articles about the 2024 United States elections. They also discuss circumlocution, generalization, jargon, hyperbole, litotes, and abbreviation. These observations demonstrate possible mechanisms of euphemistic formation, but their sample does not establish a universal ranking for all news outlets or media topics.

The importance of these mechanisms lies not in the linguistic form alone but in its contextual effect. A metaphor may illuminate an event, while another may conceal important distinctions. Generalization can be appropriate when details are unconfirmed, but misleading when reliable

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information is deliberately withheld. Each expression must therefore be assessed in relation to accuracy, relevance, and the broader message.

Euphemisms and the Formation of Public Opinion

Public opinion is influenced by multiple factors, including personal experience, cultural values, political identity, previous knowledge, social relationships, and exposure to different sources of information. Euphemisms should therefore be understood as one possible influence on public interpretation rather than as an independent cause of people's beliefs.

Nevertheless, repeated linguistic choices can contribute to how audiences understand public events. A phrase that presents a government decision as necessary reform may encourage readers to evaluate it differently from a phrase that foregrounds the decision's costs. Likewise, a term that emphasizes civilian harm may produce a different interpretive emphasis from one that describes the same event through operational terminology.

These three mechanisms are particularly relevant.

First, euphemisms can atract direct attention. By emphasizing a particular aspect of an event, a phrase may make that aspect more prominent than other information.

Second, they can influence evaluation. Neutral-sounding or favourable terminology may make a decision appear more reasonable, routine, or unavoidable. More direct wording may instead foreground its negative consequences.

Third, they can shape the visibility of responsibility. If a report describes an event in vague or impersonal terms without identifying the actors involved, readers may find it harder to determine who made a decision, who carried it out, or who was affected.

These mechanisms are consistent with framing theory and with studies of euphemism in political communication (Entman, 1993; Crespo-Fernández, 2018). However, the existence of a possible framing effect should not be confused with proof that audiences actually changed their opinions. Establishing a causal effect would require additional empirical evidence, such as audience experiments or carefully designed surveys.

For a theoretical article, the defensible conclusion is that euphemisms can contribute to the linguistic environment in which public opinion develops. Their actual effects depend on the information available, the credibility of the source, the audience's prior beliefs, and the context in which the message is received.

The Ethical Dimension of Euphemistic Language

The use of euphemisms raises an important ethical question: when does considerate language become misleading language?

Responsible media communication should balance sensitivity with transparency. Journalists may have good reasons to avoid degrading terminology or to communicate painful information carefully. However, the desire to minimize offence should not be used to justify obscuring essential facts or avoiding accountability.

A useful distinction can be made between respectful euphemism and concealing euphemism.

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Respectful euphemism preserves the essential meaning of information while reducing unnecessary offence. It can help audiences understand sensitive topics without demeaning the people involved.

Concealing euphemism, by contrast, becomes problematic when it removes essential information, minimizes serious consequences, or creates a misleadingly favourable impression. The problem is not merely that the language is indirect. It is that the indirect wording makes the underlying event more difficult to understand accurately.

Kurasova and Boichenko (2025), in their discussion of euphemisms in mass media, similarly present the phenomenon as having both socially sensitive and potentially manipulative functions. This dual perspective is important because an adequate analysis must consider both the communicative benefits and the possible risks of euphemistic language.

Media professionals can support transparency by explaining technical terminology, identifying the sources of contested expressions, clarifying the consequences of public decisions, and distinguishing between an official's characterization of an event and independently established information.

Readers also have a role. Rather than assuming that every neutral-sounding phrase is deceptive, they can ask what the expression means in context, what information it conveys, and whether important details are missing.

Developing Critical Media Literacy

Critical media literacy enables audiences to examine how language contributes to the presentation of information. In relation to euphemisms, it involves several practical questions:

1. What does the expression actually mean? Identify the event, action, or condition being described.

2. Is there a clearer alternative? Compare the wording with a more direct description without ignoring differences in factual or legal meaning.

3. What does the phrase emphasize or minimize? Consider which consequences are prominent and which receive less attention.

4. Who is responsible? Check whether the wording identifies the people or institutions involved or leaves agency unclear.

5. What evidence supports the description? Compare the report with reliable sources and relevant factual information.

These questions do not require specialist research skills. They are habits of careful reading that can help students and general audiences understand media messages more critically.

For example, when encountering the phrase workforce restructuring, a reader can examine whether the accompanying report explains the number of affected employees, the reasons for the decision, and its consequences. The phrase itself may be an accurate administrative description, but the additional information determines whether readers receive a sufficiently clear account of the event.

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Critical media literacy therefore involves more than replacing every euphemism with a harsher expression. It requires evaluating the accuracy, completeness, tone, and communicative purpose of the language used.

Conclusion

Euphemisms are an important feature of media discourse because they demonstrate how linguistic choices can influence the presentation and interpretation of public events. Drawing on pragmatics, politeness theory, framing, and critical discourse analysis, this article has examined the ways euphemistic language can soften sensitive information, construct favourable representations of political actions, frame economic problems, and support respectful communication.

The theoretical discussion demonstrates that euphemisms have a dual function. They can protect dignity and reduce unnecessary offence, but they may also reduce transparency when they obscure consequences or responsibility. Their significance depends on the relationship between the expression, its context, the information available, and the audience's interpretation.

The role of euphemisms in shaping public opinion should therefore be understood carefully. Linguistic framing can contribute to how people evaluate events, but wording alone does not determine public beliefs. Media credibility, existing attitudes, social context, and access to alternative information remain important.

Ultimately, responsible media communication requires a balance between sensitivity and accuracy. Euphemisms are not inherently manipulative, nor are they always harmless. Their use should be evaluated according to whether they help audiences understand complex realities or make those realities less visible. Developing critical media literacy can help readers recognize these distinctions and engage with media discourse more thoughtfully.

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