

# EUPHEMISM, DYSPHEMISM, AND CROSS-VARIETAL SYNONYMY\*

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Whoever stubbed his toe in the dark and cried out, “Oh, faeces!”?  
(Adams 1985:45)

A painted I-won't-say-what, standing there just as the Lord made her, with only a little bit of shift to cover places that I won't mention. (James R. Parker, *New Yorker* June 16, 1945:20)

## 1. EUPHEMISM

### 1.1 Euphemism

In *The Golden Bough* Sir James Frazer wrote about the use of euphemisms by hunters in primitive (he might have said ‘savage’) societies:

The speaker imagines himself to be overheard and understood by spirits, or animals, or other things whom his fancy endows with human intelligence; and hence he avoids certain words and substitutes others in their stead, either from a desire to soothe and propitiate these beings by speaking well of them, or from a dread that they may understand his speech and know what he is about, when he happens to be engaged in that which, if they know of it, would excite their anger or their fear. (Frazer 1911:417)

What Frazer says here is applicable, with little adaptation, to many of the euphemisms we shall be discussing in this paper. A simple definition of the wide range of expressions that have been called euphemisms is:

A euphemism is used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face<sup>1</sup>: either one's own or, by giving offense, that of the audience, or of some third party.

Folk belief has it that what we are calling ‘dispreferred expressions’ typically denote taboo topics, and therefore might alternatively be called ‘taboo terms’. In its original conception, as borrowed from Tonga, taboo is prohibited behaviour. It was prohibited because it was believed to be dangerous to certain individuals, or to society as a whole. To violate the taboo would automatically cause harm (even death) to the violator or his/her fellows. However, many of the taboo terms we shall discuss are avoided because their use is regarded as distasteful within a given social context: they are dispreferred, not because of any fear that physical or metaphysical harm may befall either the speaker or the audience, but lest the speaker lose face by offending the sensibilities of the audience. Some speakers would claim that to utter the taboo terms would offend their own sensibilities, because of the supposed unpleasantness or ugliness of the taboo terms themselves (see 1.4). Hock 1986:303ff refers to “tabooistic distortions” (i.e. phonological contamination, metathesis, etc.) of body-part names in the history of Indo-European languages; such distortions were probably motivated by superstitions in some cases, and by distaste in others.

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\* This is a draft of the first chapter of our forthcoming book, provisionally entitled *Euphemism, Dysphemism, and the Problem of Jargon*. We would be grateful for readers' comments.

<sup>1</sup> The notion of face and its importance to choice of expression is discussed in some detail in Allan 1986 section 1.2 and Brown & Levinson 1987.

In fact, many euphemisms are alternatives for expressions the speaker or writer would simply prefer not to use in executing a particular communicative intention on a given occasion. Take the example of a widow who prefers to say she has *paying guests* rather than *lodgers*, it is stretching credulity to claim that *lodger* is a taboo term, even for this lady; it is rather the case that, to her mind, *paying guest* has more positive connotations - or alternatively, fewer negative connotations — than does *lodger*

## 1.2 Types of euphemism

Many euphemisms are figurative; many have been or are being the cause of semantic change; some show remarkable inventiveness of either figure or form; and some are indubitably playful. Euphemism can be achieved through antithetical means, e.g. by circumlocution and abbreviation, acronym or even complete omission and also by one-for-one substitution; by general-for-specific and part-for-whole substitution;<sup>2</sup> by hyperbole and understatement; by the use of learned terms or technical jargon instead of common terms, and by the use of colloquial instead of formal terms. Many learned terms and some technical jargon is either borrowed from another language or constructed from one: for English, they are mostly derived from Latin or Ancient Greek. Most languages seem to have some euphemisms based on borrowed words or morphs. Consider some examples of these many types of euphemism.

### 1.2.1 Euphemism and verbal play: figures, metaphors, flippancies and remodellings

We find **figurative expressions** like *the cavalry's come* for 'I've got my period', *go to the happy hunting grounds* for 'die'. The first of these is **metaphorical** in implicitly representing the onset of catamenia as the arrival of the red-coated cavalry. An even more inventive metaphor is *the miraculous pitcher, that holds water with the mouth downwards* for 'vagina'<sup>3</sup> (cf. Grose 1811). It seems unlikely that this lengthy example of verbal play was widely used, and its **flippancy** puts us in mind of euphemisms like *kick the bucket* for 'die' with their real or pretended disdain for a taboo. As we shall see in later in the book, this type of euphemism edges into dysphemism (initially discussed in 2).

It is questionable whether *kick the bucket* can usefully be called euphemism rather than simply slang, which it undoubtedly is also. Later in the book we discuss the interrelation of slang with euphemism; but at this juncture we merely note that certain slang terms, some of which might be judged euphemistic, exemplify verbal play, i.e. rhyme, quasi-reduplication, alliteration, pleasing rhythms, silly words, etc. For example *over-shoulder boulder-holders* 'bra'; *What bam, thank you ma'am!*; *hoddy-doddy (all arse and no body)* 'a short clumsy person'; *tantadlin tart* 'turd'; *tally-wags* or *twiddle -diddles* 'testicles'; *doodle, diddle, dink, dong* 'penis'; *tuzzy- muzzy* 'vagina'; *rantum-scantum* 'copulate'; numerous terms for 'masturbate': *beat the bishop/beaver, pull the pope, pull one's pud, crank one's shank, jerkin' the gherkin, tweak one's twinkie, juice the sluice, stump-jump* (cf. Aman 1984/1985:106). Then there is rhyming slang like *whistle [and flute]* 'suit', *jam-jar* 'car', *jimmy-riddle* 'piddle, piss', *groan and grunt* 'cunt, girlfriend', *bristols [Bristol cities]* 'titties, breasts', *Brahms [and Liszt]* 'pissed, drunk', etc.

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<sup>2</sup> This terminology is more transparent than the traditional 'synecdoche and metonymy', the interpretations of which are surprisingly various.

<sup>3</sup> We use the term *vagina* with its normal meaning within our community, namely to denote 'the female genitalia' or 'cunt'. *Vagina* is polysemous: the meaning just given is an extension from 'the passage between the vulva and the cervix.' It is precious to claim that people misuse *vagina* to denote the vulva, as do Ash 1980 and Hankey 1980.

**Remodellings** like *sugar* or *shoot* for ‘shit’, *tarnation* for ‘damnation’, *cripes* or *crumbs* for ‘Christ’ usually end up like one-for-one substitutions (see 1.2.2) in which either the onset or rhyme of the dispreferred term is retained, but complemented by the rest of some semantically unrelated word.<sup>4</sup>

A different kind of remodelling is exemplified by ‘secret languages’ like Pig Latin, Aggy-paggy, Up-up, etc. Instead of effecting one-for-one substitution on the pattern described above, there are regular morpho-phonological changes such as metathesis or affixation to every word in the secret language.

## 122 Circumlocutions, clippings, acronyms, abbreviations, omissions and one-for-one substitutions

There are **circumlocutions** like *little girl’s room* for ‘toilet’, or *categorial inaccuracy* for lie, or *the person I am wont to refer to by the perpendicular pronoun* for ‘lime’. The first is also figurative; the other two use the puffed up jargon of bureaucratise (or a pastiche of it) instead of a common term.

There are clippings like *jeeze* for ‘Jesus’, *bra* for ‘brassiere’ (both end-clipped), and the archaic *nation* for ‘damnation’ (cf. Grose 1811, this is fore-clipped); **acronyms** like *snafu* for ‘situation normal, all fucked up’; **abbreviations**<sup>5</sup> like *S.O.B.* for ‘son-of-a-bitch’ or *pee* for ‘piss’. Also *f*— instead of printing ‘fuck’. Omissions take this kind of euphemism one step further. There are **quasi-omissions** which substitute some non-lexical expression for the dispreferred term; e.g. Grose 1811 contains the following:

Cauliflower ... Also the private parts of a woman; the reason for which appellation is given in the following story: A woman, who was giving evidence in a cause wherein it was necessary to express those parts, made use of the term cauliflower; for which the judge on the bench, a peevish old fellow, reproved her, saying she might as well call it artichoke. Not so my lord, replied she; for an artichoke has a bottom, but a \*\*\*\* and a cauliflower have none.

This, together with the appearance of \*\*\*\* in other entries, leaves no doubt that Grose uses four asterisks as a synonym for what he otherwise calls ‘the monosyllable’. The spoken counterparts to dashes and asterisks are things like *mhm*, *er-mm*, etc. Full- omissions seem less common, but there is *There’s the pot calling the kettle black* which omits *arse* from the end (cf. Grose 1811). Also *I need to go*. from which is omitted to *the lavatory*. We found one Middle Dutch writer who used *vernoy smans/swtjfs* ‘irritation of the man’s/woman’s’ thereby altogether omitting the name for the genital organ itself (see 1.5).

Then there are the one-for-one substitutions like *bottom* for ‘arse’, *casket* for ‘coffin’. Both these illustrate meaning extensions, and are arguably figurative. Not all one-for-one substitutions are like that: for instance, Grose’s *the monosyllable* for ‘cunt’, nor the 18-19th

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<sup>4</sup> Gandour 1978 describes ‘khamphūan’ ‘word reverse’ in Thai: ‘In this word game, the vowel(s) and final consonant as well as the tone may be exchanged between two words or syllables.’ (p.111) Thus *khay phçāy lom* ‘who farted?’ becomes *khay phçōm laay* ‘whose hair [is] striped?’ Here the resulting string contains normal Thai words, but nonce words can result, e.g. *khaw lij raboj* ‘he penis infected [= he’s got the clap]’ becomes *khaw loj rabij* ‘he down –

<sup>5</sup> The difference between acronyms and abbreviations is this: acronyms are proper words created from the initial letter or two of the words in a phrase, and they are pronounced like other words, cf. *snafu*, *radar*, *laser*, *UNESCO*, etc. By contrast, abbreviations do not form proper words, and so they are pronounced as strings of letters, cf. *S.O.B.*, *IOU*, *U.S.A.*, *MP*, *ip*, *tu* etc. Cf. Allan 1986 4.7.5.

century *inexpressibles* for ‘underclothes, breeches’ - which also exemplifies the general-for-specific class of euphemisms.

### 1.2.3 General-for-specific and part-for-whole euphemisms

Euphemisms like the legal *person* for ‘penis’<sup>6</sup> employ a **general-for-specific** strategy (it is also a one-for-one substitution). There are various subclasses of general-for-specific the euphemism just mentioned is whole-for-part; *nether regions* for ‘genitals’ invokes the general-area-for-a-specific-area-within-it; *go to bed* for ‘fuck’ invokes the-usual- location-where-a-specific-event-takes-place; U.S. President Richard Nixon’s references to *prething* and *postthing* (where ‘thing’ = Watergate break-in), the use of *thingummybob* for ‘penis’ (or whatever), and expressions like *the you-know-what* to denote almost anything that can be properly inferred from context — all these employ the- maximally-general-for-something-specific strategy for euphemism. Rather similar was (is?) the use of *inexpressibles* or *unmentionables* and perhaps *smalls* for ‘underclothing’; also Grose’s use of *the monosyllable*: these employ the-non-specific- for-something-specific strategy. And so on: the number of general-for-specific subclasses is probably boundless.

A **part-for-whole** euphemism is demonstrated in *spend a penny* for ‘go to the lavatory’ (from the days when women’s loos cost a penny to access); and *I’ve got a cough* may occasionally ignore the stuffed up nose, post-nasal drip, and running eyes. Afrikaans *ghat* originally ‘hole’, is used in much the same way as British or Australian *bum*, American *fanny*. But euphemisms of this kind seem comparatively rare, though dysphemisms are not. This is not surprising given that euphemisms usually aim to conceal or at least disguise.

### 12.4 Hyperbole and understatement in euphemism

Hyperboles (overstatements) are found in euphemisms like *flight to glory* meaning death’, or *villa in a premier location by the bay* referring to a ‘dilapidated artisan’s cottage, five streets away from the bay’, or *Personal Assistant to the Secretary (Special Activities)* for ‘cook’, cf. Rawson 1981:11 who remarks that this ‘illustrates a basic rule of bureaucracies: the longer the title, the lower the rank — presumably to upgrade the lower ranks in at least this one inexpensive respect.

There are euphemistic **understatements** like *sleep* for ‘die’ Many general-for-specific euphemisms are also understatements, e.g. *thing* for whatever (Watergate break-in, genitals) or *deed* for ‘act of murder’ (or whatever). Litotes like *He’s not very bright* meaning ‘he’s as thick as two short planks’ fall into this class. At one time the French verb *baiser* meant ‘kiss’<sup>7</sup> and has come to mean ‘screw, fuck’ - the transition shows a nice euphemistic understatement which in this case was a part-for-whole euphemism. This seems to be an instance where traditional metonymy is a more accurate description — here kissing is perhaps more associated activity than a part of the whole.

### 1.2.5 Euphemism through borrowing

The use of Latin homonyms provides Standard English with euphemisms for bodily exuviae, sex, and the associated acts and bodily organs. The use of *perspire* instead of *sweat*, *expectorate* instead of *spit*, *defecate* and *faeces* instead of *shit*, *copulate* instead of *fuck*, *anus* instead of *arsehole*, *genitals* or *genitalia* instead of *sex organs*, *vagina* instead of *cunt*, *labia* instead of *lips* [of the vagina], and so forth, is accepted practice when using Standard

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Pannick 1985:145 for English law, and Vagrancy Act, State of Victoria (Australia), 7, 1(c).

<sup>7</sup> *Embrasser* is now used for the verb “kiss”.

English. Until recently, translations of taboo terms from exotic languages, and descriptions of taboo acts, caused an author to suddenly switch from English to Latin. For instance, Hollis in *The Masai: Their Language and Folklore* translates the story of the demon Konyek: at one point in the story Konyek sits beneath a tree in which a frightened woman is hiding, causing her to tremble so much *neisirisir ngulak*, which Hollis translates as ‘Incipit mingere guttatim’ (Hollis 1905:137); it would be more aptly rendered for an English readership ‘it made her piss herself.’ In his translation of the very brief Maasai tale I omon le-’ngai o en-gop’ we find the following:

### **The story of the sky and the earth**

We understand that the sky once married the earth.

Haec verba dicere volunt. Ut maritus supra feminam in coitione iacet, sic coelum supra terram. Ubi lucet sol et cadit imber, terra calorem recipit et humorem: non aliter femina hominis semine fruitur.<sup>8</sup> (Hollis 1905:279).

Even in Lewis & Short’s *A Latin Dictionary* (impression of 1975, though it dates from 1879) the meaning for *cunire* is given as ‘est stercus facere’ instead of the English ‘have a shit’ or even ‘defecate’. It is probable that Latin was euphemistically used because of the author’s prudery in not wishing to use everyday English terms, but with the added rationalisation that the Latin text would be uninterpretable to the uneducated — and therefore to the young and innocent.

Latin is not the only source for euphemism. There are, for instance, from French *po* for ‘chamber pot’, *lingerie* for ‘women’s underclothing’,<sup>9</sup> *masseuse* for ‘whore’, *materiel* for ‘armament and ammunition’, *sortie* for ‘a sallying forth by a military unit’; from Italian *in flagrante dilecto* for ‘in a compromising situation’ (itself a euphemism!); etc.

Using words borrowed from other languages to function as euphemisms is characteristic of many languages. For instance, among Thais fluent in English, including doctors addressing well-educated patients, English words are used in preference to Thai euphemisms for penis, vagina, menstruation (abbreviated to *men* — but probably not from *menses*) and sperm. It is interesting that other body parts and bodily exuviae are not generally rendered in English, just those connected with reproduction.<sup>10</sup>

Borrowing is code-switching, or a form of it. And so is the use of so-called ‘special languages’ like the ‘mother-in-law’ languages of Aboriginal Australia (see Frazer 1911:346f; Dixon 1972:32, 1982 ch.2). ‘Special languages’ are used for euphemistic purposes, and within our classification of euphemism they can be regarded as an exaggerated form of borrowing.

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<sup>8</sup> The Latin reads: ‘They say that just as a husband lies over his wife to make love, so does the sky lie above the earth. When the sun shines and the rain falls, the earth receives heat and water: in the same way a woman is fertilized by a man.’ The final sentence of the Maasai text reads: ‘If the sun beats down on it and the rain falls, what is underneath arrives there [interpret that as you will!]; and so it is with a man and his wife.’

<sup>9</sup> According to our definition of euphemism, *brassiere* is not one, because there is no alternative. Indeed, the abbreviation *bra* is more like a euphemism than *brassiere* itself. On the other hand, the use of French is *per se* euphemistic, and there really is no native English term — other than such horrors as *tit-covers*, *breastplates*, *over-shoulder boulder-holders*, etc.

<sup>10</sup> We are grateful to Pornpimol Senawong for this information. There is some discussion of this strategy in her Ph.D. thesis *Sociolinguistic Aspects of Transference from English to Thai* (Monash University, in preparation).

### 1.2.6 Learned terms or technical jargon and colloquial or common terms as euphemisms

In the previous section we exemplified the euphemistic use of **learned terms or technical jargon** instead of common terms, e.g. *faeces* for ‘shit’. The antithetical strategy is to use colloquial rather than more formal terms, e.g. *period* for ‘menstruate’.

### 1.3 Which is the euphemism?

It may seem obvious that *pass away* is a euphemism whereas *die* is the dispreferred term, and so forth. But the truth is, as usual, not so straightforward. How many of us would seriously say *These flowers have passed away* rather than *These flowers have died*? Compare the terms *menstruation* and *period*. There are occasions the former is the euphemism; others when the colloquial term is more appropriate; and yet other occasions when the learned and the colloquial terms are equally appropriate — where neither is a euphemism. It follows that, although we believe all euphemisms can be analyzed as the preference for one expression over another, we do not believe that one term will necessarily be ‘dispreferred’ while the other is a ‘euphemism’ — such that these descriptions might be included in their dictionary entries.

Normally, the choice between alternatives depends entirely on context. For instance, the choice between *menstruation* and *period* is a matter of style,<sup>11</sup> and one expression will often be more acceptable than another within a given style. For instance later in the book we discuss ‘The menstruation taboo’: to refer to this as ‘The period taboo’ would be inappropriate - i.e. dispreferred in the context of this book. The choice is not always so clear: in an article on the victims of bank holdups and the like in *Time Australia* September 12, 1988:24 we find the following:

“A lot of stress starts to happen for those who have been lying on the floor with a gun at their head,” says Michelle Mulvihill, a Sydney psychologist. Women lose their periods; people develop migraines, backaches and symptoms of real anxiety. She says ...

In this context, Mulvihill could just as well have said *Women stop menstruating*; although this would be marginally more formal than ‘Women lose their periods.’ The comparative informality of the latter is consistent with Mulvihill’s style of spontaneous speech (as quoted). Furthermore, *period* seems to be the most commonly used noun among contemporary Australian women:<sup>12</sup> note, however, that this does not, in our view, make it the ‘dispreferred’ term.

Euphemism and style are not the same thing, they intersect and interact: the style used defines the set of euphemisms which are conventional within that style; the euphemisms used help to define and maintain a particular style. For example circumlocution and metaphor characterize high style, both in polite society and in allegorical literature; learned terms are used in formal styles and specialist registers, and remodelling in colloquial styles.

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<sup>11</sup> We use ‘style’ as an abbreviation for ‘register and level of formality’. A ‘register’ is a language variety associated with a certain occupational, institutional or recreational group, whose vocabulary is a recognizable ‘jargon’, e.g. legalese, linguisticalese, cricketese, bureaucratese, criminalese, etc. By ‘level of formality’ we mean levels like colloquial, casual, formal, etc., cf. Joos 1961. These levels are often called ‘styles’, but that is not the way we are using the term.

<sup>12</sup> Note that *menstruation* is an abstract noun whereas *period* is a concrete noun; hence one can say *my period* but not *\*my menstruation* by which we would understand ‘my menstrual cycle’ which is not synonymous with *my period*. Note also the existence of that adjective *menstrual* which has no felicitous counterpart derived from *period*. These different characteristics are consistent with the greater formality of the term *menstruation*.

Despite our claim that particular expressions are not necessarily euphemistic in all contexts, it would ignore reality to pretend that ordinary people do not speak as if some expressions are intrinsically euphemistic - for instance, *loo* is euphemistic whereas *shithouse* is not. What seems to be meant by this is that, in order to be polite to a casual acquaintance of the opposite sex in a formal situation in a middle class environment, one would normally be expected to use the euphemism rather than its dispreferred counterpart(s). When we describe some expression as a euphemism, without reference to the context of its use, this is what we have in mind.

#### 1.4 Are some words intrinsically nasty? (No!)

*Annum* appellas alieno nomine; cur non suo potius? Si turpe EST, ne alieno quidem; si non **est**, suo potius. “When you speak of the *anus*, you call it by a name that is not its own; why not rather call it by its own? If it is indecent, do not use even the substituted name; if not, you had better call it by its own.” (Cicero *Epistulae ad Familiares*, IX, xxii)

Because the correlation between the form and the meaning of a language expression is arbitrary,<sup>13</sup> there is no *a priori* basis for distinction between the mentionable euphemism and the unmentionable taboo term. It is mysterious why the euphemisms *pass away*, *misappropriate*, *We’ll have to let you go*, and *I’m going to the loo* have fewer unpleasant connotations than their corresponding taboo terms *die*, *steal*, *You’re fired* and *I’m going for a piss*. The difference presumably derives from a ‘naturalist hypothesis’ (cf. Allan 1986 2.8), a persistent belief that the form of an expression somehow communicates the essential nature of whatever it denotes; in Frazer’s words: “the link between a name and the person or thing denominated by it is not a mere arbitrary and ideal association, but a real and substantial bond which unites the two” (1911:318). Taboo terms are contaminated by the taboo topics which they denote; but by definition the euphemisms are not — or not yet — contaminated. In fact, a euphemism often degenerates into a taboo term through contamination by the taboo topic. For example, Cicero observes that Latin *penis* ‘tail’ had been a euphemism for *mentula*: ‘At hodie *penis* est in obscenis’ “But nowadays *penis* is among the obscenities” (*Epistulae ad Familiares*, IX, xxii). English *undertaker* once meant ‘odd-job man’ (someone who undertakes to do things), which was used as a euphemism for the person taking care of funerals; like most ambiguous taboo terms, the meaning of *undertaker* narrowed to the taboo sense alone, and is now being replaced by the euphemism funeral director. Other examples are: English *hussy* originally ‘housewife’, French *fille* and German *Dime* both originally ‘girl’, and Ancient Greek *hetaira* originally ‘female friend’ - all of which were also euphemisms for *prostitute* that themselves became taboo terms.<sup>14</sup> The once euphemistic *toilet* (from French *toile* ‘cloth’) in *going to the toilet* is being superseded by *bathroom* or *restroom* in American and *loo* in spoken British and Australian. Perhaps we should say that *toilet* is ‘fading’ as a euphemism and may well disappear, as has *necessary house* (see Grose 1811). We know of no converse histories in which a taboo term has been elevated to a euphemism,<sup>15</sup> although some euphemisms which have degraded into taboo terms come back from the dead after they have lost their taboo sense: during the 17th and 18th centuries the verb *occupy*

<sup>13</sup> This is so despite the fact that every language has some vocabulary based on sound symbolism, and even though everyone within a language community must tacitly concur in using a certain form with certain meanings.

<sup>14</sup> In French, ‘girl’ is now *jeune fille*, in German *Fräulein* or *Mädchen*; in Ancient Greek, ‘girl/female friend’ came to be rendered by *phil ē*.

<sup>15</sup> Greek *kakos* ‘bad’ might be a counterexample: it derives from the Indo-European root *\*kak(k)* ‘shit’: this is the source for our *cacky*, which has cognates in other IE languages; cf. Arbeitman 1980: 78f.

meant ‘copulate’, during which time non taboo senses lapsed; it only re-entered the lexicon in its current sense of ‘inhabit, take up’ after it had ceased to be used in the taboo sense. Al] this supports the view that taboo terms are classified as such because of a belief, be it ever so vague, that their form reflects the essential nature of the taboo topics they denote. This is exactly why the terms themselves are often said to be unpleasant or ugly sounding, why they are miscalled ‘dirty words.’

#### 1.4 Dirt Clings

There is a wealth of evidence that where a language expression is ambiguous between a taboo sense and a non-taboo sense its meaning will often narrow to the taboo sense alone. Some examples: (A) The noun *accident* once meant ‘that which happens, a chance event’ (cf. *accidentally, by accident*), but its association with misfortune has narrowed the meaning to ‘chance misfortune’ in *There was an accident, He had an accident*. (B) *Coney* (rhymes with *honey*) was the word for ‘rabbit’ until the late 19th century, when it dropped out of use because of the taboo homonym meaning ‘cunt’. (C) The British still use *cock* to mean ‘rooster’; but, because of the taboo homonym meaning ‘penis’, this sense of *cock* started to die out in American in the early 19th century and is now archaic; it is nowadays very rare in Australian. There has also been an effect on words containing *cock*: e.g. Mayor Ed Koch of New York City gives his surname a spelling-pronunciation /kɔk3tJ/; *cockroach* has become *roach* in American; and although there were other factors at work too, the use of *haystack* in place of *haycock*, and the use of *weather-vane* as an alternative to *weather-cock*, were undoubtedly influenced by taboo avoidance. (D) Bloomfield 1927:228 noted that *ass* meaning ‘donkey’ was dropping out of use in American because of the taboo homonym (meaning ‘arse’ or ‘cunt’). (E) Cicero in *Epistulae Ad Familiares* IX, xxii pointed out that *ruta* ‘rue’ and *menta* ‘mint’ can be used without impropriety; the same is true for the diminutive of *ruta*, *rutula* but not of *menta*, because the resulting *mentula* means ‘penis’. (F) Hock 1986:295 believes that their phonetic similarity to *fuck* led to the demise of the following words: *fuk* ‘a sail’; *feck*, cp. *feckless*; *feck* or *fack* ‘one of the stomachs of a ruminant’; *fac*, an abbreviation for *factotum*; *lack(s)* ‘fact(s)’. But we think he drives his argument too far, because the pronunciation /fak(s)/ is still used freely, indeed so freely that ‘FAX’ machines are almost a fad. (G) Since the 1960s the adjective *gay* has been used less and less in the sense ‘bright, full of fun’ because it also has the meaning ‘homosexual’.

There are two reasons why the language abandons homonyms and alloemes of taboo terms. One is the relative salience of taboo terms: Osgood, Suci & Tannenbaum 1957 discovered a general tendency for any derogatory or unfavourable denotation or connotation within a language expression to dominate the interpretation of its immediate context. The other is that a speaker won’t risk appearing to use a taboo term when none was intended. For example, there are some (mostly older) English speakers who, if they catch themselves using the adjective *gay* in its former sense will, with mild embarrassment, explicitly draw attention to this intended meaning. Their late 19th century forbears, fearful of seeming impropriety, avoided the terms *leg* and *breast* even when speaking of a cooked fowl, referring instead to its *dark* (or *red*) *meat* and *white meat* Where there is little likelihood of being misunderstood, the homonyms of a taboo term are likely to persist in the language. This is the case for instance with *queen* ‘regina’<sup>16</sup> which is under no threat from the homonym meaning ‘gay male’ simply because one denotatum is necessarily female, the other is necessarily male; the converse holds, *mutatis mutandis* for the end-clipped American epithet *mother* ‘motherfucker’. Similarly we experience no constraint in saying *It’s queer* but we generally

<sup>16</sup> A term which makes some people feel uncomfortable because of its phonetic similarity to *vagina*. It is quite usual for speakers to avoid expressions which are phonetically similar to taboo terms.

avoid saying *He's queer* if we mean 'He's peculiar' preferring *He's eccentric* or *He's a bit odd*. Bull meaning 'bullshit' is dissimilated from *bull* 'male, typically bovine, animal' because it heads an uncountable NP instead of a countable one. Dissimilation, however, is not always a protection for the innocent language expression. One author recalls a non-native postgraduate student giving a paper in which he several times used the phrase 'my testees' to refer to 'those subjected to a test': this appellation provoked some mirth in part of his audience. Pornpimol Senawong tells us that bilingual Thais may get apprehensive about using the Thai word *fuk* 'gourd, pumpkin' in the hearing of other Thais fluent in English. *Fuk* is used for the name of the main character in the award-winning Thai novel *Kham Phi Phaksa (The Judgement)* by Chart Kobjitti, and there was much speculation about how the name would be transliterated when the novel was translated into English. We can report that the translator called him 'Fak'. Thai English-teachers experience some embarrassment, and their students some amusement, with the English word *yet* which is the equivalent of 'to fuck' in colloquial Thai. Farb 1974:82 reports something similar: "In the Nootka Indian language of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, the English word *such* so closely resembles the Nootka word meaning 'cunt' that teachers find it very difficult to convince their students to utter the English word in class." Similar reports of cross-language effects have been reported elsewhere, too (e.g. Cicero *op.cit.*). Such is the power of taboo.

### 1.5 The Middle Dutch Perspective on euphemism

The authors' original intention was to discuss and compare euphemism and taboo in late 20th century English and Middle Dutch, with the aim of using the comparison to gain perspective on usage in both languages. It is for that reason that Middle Dutch features very significantly in this book, even though we have been led beyond our original goal to a discussion of more theoretical matters.

We start with the MIDDLE Dutch because nothing substantial remains of Dutch at any earlier period. The only evidence of original Old Low Franconian or so-called Old Dutch is one sentence, hastily scribbled in the margins of a Latin manuscript sometime during the 11th century. It reads:

<i>Hebban olla uogala nestas bigunnan</i>	'All the birds have begun nests,
<i>hinase hue ejende thu</i>	except for me and you.
<i>uu[at] unbida[n uu]e nu</i>	What are we waiting for now?'

Old Dutch was clearly as euphemistic as any language today.

It is a curious assumption among certain writers today that euphemisms are of recent origin (see for example Adler 1978:73f). Perhaps this is because of the way in which we are made to perceive languages of the past. Their verbal patterns are preserved for us now in the neat lists and regular paradigms of the modern handbook and there they remain in an almost fossilized state. As Burchfield (1985:20) says of Old English, "it is almost as if its main reason for surviving was to supply paradigms and fine-spun sentences for grammarians and literary historians." It is impossible from these handbooks to gain any animated impression of a living breathing speech community which existed at an earlier time. Such mummification can tell us little of the subtleties of social attitudes which might have once prevailed.

Why shouldn't these languages have been as euphemistically rich as any language today? Modern society has its deodorizing sprays and perfumes, but we should not underestimate the scent balls, the sweet-smelling vapours and inhalations of the middle ages. And there is no reason to assume the situation to be any different in language. People during this time were no more free of 'deodorizing' language than we are today. In fact, with filth, disease and

death existing on a more extensive scale, the need to hide behind the sweet-smelling euphemism was perhaps once even greater. Indeed, there is no evidence that euphemism is absent from the language of any post-Neolithic human community, cf. Frazer 1911, Griffin 1985, Burchfield 1985.

The Middle Dutch texts examined here consist of medical treatises from 14th and 15th century Holland and are therefore written in the non-literary style typical of this sort of technical prose or 'Fachprosa'. The medical literature of the middle ages is not known for its originality; in fact, original thought did not feature strongly in any contemporary works — plagiarism was an accepted practice. Most of the texts consulted contain some descriptions based on original observations, but are largely compilations of ideas contained in early Latin works. These are not translations, however. They show a language quite independent of the Latin.

These medical texts have two important advantages for a study of euphemisms. For one, they contain little, if any, literary artificiality, and reflect closely the spoken idiom of the time. Certain elevated prose styles, particularly of the late Middle Ages, make extended use of highly elaborate and artificial expressions which go beyond the euphemism of ordinary language; and poetry is complicated by the formalisms of metre and rhyme. Not only are the medical texts free from literary ambition, but it is in precisely these types of texts that discussion of sickness, death, sex, bowel movements, menstruation etc. abound.

When relying on early texts, it is sometimes difficult to know what was considered appropriate and what was not; consequently it is difficult to assess the degree of delicacy of some of the terms used. It seems clear, however, that most of the things which cause us anxiety and embarrassment today, were also of concern then, and avoidance terminology was as much a part of their language as it is of ours. But, as will be shown in the book, there are some interesting divergences from modern practices.

## 1.6 Summing up so far

Typical euphemisms are motivated by fear and/or distaste — both of which are driven by a desire not to offend; but, as we shall see, euphemisms are also motivated by the wish to display in-group identity markers, the wish to upgrade the denotatum, and even the wish to amuse. Many euphemisms seem to fall into more than one of these categories at the same time; e.g. *kick the bucket* is typically a flippant downgrading of death, a taboo topic normally feared; on other occasions, it can function as a dysphemism (see 2).

In referring above to “a particular communicative intention in a given context”, we draw attention to the fact that the speaker or writer chooses either to use or to not-use a euphemism in order to create a certain effect on a given occasion; e.g. there are occasions when one chooses between saying *I'm going to the loo* and *I'm going for a piss* for different effects, and others when good manners absolutely constrain the choice to the former. What motivates the choice is in many ways similar to what motivates the choice between saying *Abu Nidal is a freedom fighter* or *Abu Nidal is a terrorist*. On some occasions at least, the latter can be regarded as a 'dysphemism' because the term *terrorist* has unfavourable connotations, and is selected for that purpose. A dysphemism, then, is used for precisely the opposite reason that a euphemism is used.

## 2. DYSPHEMISM

Whereas the term euphemism is well-known and has wide currency, 'dysphemism' does not. We said above that a dysphemism is used for precisely the opposite reason that a euphemism is used, and we define it as follows:

A dysphemism is an expression with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum or to the audience, or both, and it is substituted for a neutral or euphemistic expression for just that reason.

Dysphemisms, then, are used in talking about one's opponents, things one wishes to show disapproval of, and things one wishes to be seen to downgrade. They are therefore characteristic of political groups and cliques talking about their opponents; of feminists speaking about men; and also of larrikins and macho types speaking of women and effete behaviours.

Dysphemism employs most of the same strategies as euphemism, but there are two main differences. One is that part-for-whole dysphemisms are far more frequent than general-for-specific ones, which is the converse of the situation with euphemisms (e.g. the use of *tits* for 'breasts' is part-for-whole, as are figurative epithets like in *He's a prick*). The other is that the antithesis between 'hyperbole and understatement' is inappropriate. Hyperbole may be used to magnify the offence, and this is often achieved by diminishing or downgrading the person addressed or what is being spoken of: the consequence is, paradoxically, to usurp the function one would expect to be assigned to understatement, so that if there ever is understatement, it is just this dysphemistic hyperbole. Other differences between the strategies for euphemism and those for dysphemism are predictable: circumlocution is most usually dysphemistic when it manifests an unwanted jargon; the use of borrowed terms and technical jargon is only dysphemistic when intended to obfuscate or offend the audience; and so forth.

Consider some examples. NATO has a *deterrent* (euphemism) against the Russian *threat* (dysphemism). In the mid-1980s the U.S.S.R. claimed to have been *invited* (euphemism) into Afghanistan; the Americans claimed that the Russians were *aggressors* (dysphemism) there. Dysphemism is indicated by the term *so-called*: e.g. *the so-called democracies of the Eastern block* doesn't make a dysphemism out of 'democracies', but it does indicate disagreement with and disapproval of the presupposition that there are such things as democracies in the Eastern block. The latter phrase, *Eastern block*, is itself dysphemistic: note the totalitarian and obstructive connotations of 'block' when contrasted with the free-among-equals connotations of *Western alliance*. In comparisons of personal behaviour like *I'm generous, but she's spendthrift; I'm careful, but he's mean; I'm strong-minded and he's plain obstinate*, etc. the second clause is intentionally dysphemistic by comparison with first.

Dysphemistic terms of insult found in personal disputes of a colloquial nature include: (A) Comparisons of people with animals conventionally ascribed certain behaviours, e.g. calling someone a *louse, mouse, bird, coot, galah, chicken, bat, rat, cat, dog, bitch, vixen, rabbit, sow, pig, cow, bull, ox, goat, ass/donkey, mule, snake, ape, monkey*, etc. (see Leach 1964). (B) Epithets derived from tabooed bodily organs, bodily exuviae, and sexual behaviours. (C) Ascriptions of mental or physical inadequacy, such as *idiot, fuckwit, nincompoop, fool, cretin, maniac*, etc.; *spastic, weakling, baldy, four-eyes*, etc. (D) Finally there are terms of insult or disrespect, some of which invoke slurs on the target's character: e.g. *biddy, crone, hag, bag, battle-axe, codger, geezer, crank, fuddy-duddy, fuss-budget, grump, foggy, galoot*, etc. Afrikaners often use *skepsel* 'creature' when referring to Blacks and Coloureds; in Nazi German, Jews were described as *kriechend* 'crawling, servile'; Nazis described the marriage of an 'Aryan' to a non-Aryan as *Blutschande* 'blood disgrace' or *Blutvergiftung* 'blood poisoning, tetanus'; (cf. Clyne 1987).

Like euphemism, dysphemism is not just a property of the word itself, but of the way it is used. There is nothing intrinsically dysphemistic in the word *Asian*, but many people from Asia feel that being described as “Asians” rather than more particularly as Chinese, Indian, Kampuchean, or Thai etc. is dysphemistic. The point is more vividly demonstrated by the use of the word *liberalism* in a racist tabloid: “... simply a manifestation of the sickness called liberalism which is carrying Western man swiftly toward his extinction” (Strom 1984:7, quoted by Clyne 1987:38). Here ‘liberalism’ is a dysphemism.

Like euphemisms, dysphemisms interact with style and therefore have the potential to produce stylistic discord; an example would be where someone at a formal dinner party publicly announced *I’m off to have a piss*, rather than saying something like *excuse me for a moment*. According to our definition, euphemisms and dysphemisms are deliberate. However, they may occur inadvertently, for instance when someone commits a social gaffe like Eliza Doolittle in Shaw’s *Pygmalion* Act III.

LIZA [*nodding to the others*] Goodbye, all.

FREDDY [*opening the door for her*] Are you walking across the Park, Miss Doolittle? If so —

LIZA [*perfectly elegant diction*] Walk! Not bloody likely. [*Sensation*]. I am going in a taxi. [*She goes out*].

*Pickering gasps and sits down.*

MRS EYNSFORD HILL [*suffering from shock*] Well, I really can’t get used to the new ways. (Shaw 1946:78)

Usually, the use of jargon to people not initiated to it is inadvertently dysphemistic - but it can be deliberate. Because of their offensive nature, inadvertent dysphemisms will draw attention to themselves in a way that inadvertent euphemisms do not.

### 3. X-PHEMISMS AND CROSS-VARIETAL SYNONYMY

For convenience in discussion, we will call the set union of euphemisms and dysphemisms ‘X-phemisms’. X-phemisms (i.e. euphemisms and dysphemisms) are cross-varietal synonyms. *Taraxacum densleonis* and *dandelion* are cross-varietal synonyms, so are *girl*, *lass*, *broad*, *sheila*. Such synonyms are defined in the following terms:

For any entity D that is properly called ‘taraxacum densleonis’ in context  $C_{i..m}$  D is properly called ‘dandelion’ in contexts  $C_{j..n}$ . There is always a least one context [perhaps metalinguistic statement] to form an intersection  $se$  of  $C_{i..m}$  with  $C_{j..n}$

Cross-varietal synonyms have the same denotation but differ in connotation. Consequently the denial of the denotatum of one will also deny that denotatum for all its cross-varietal synonyms. However, it is quite possible to deny the applicability of one term while asserting (a preference for) the connotations of a cross-varietal synonym, cf *He’s not a lodger, he’s a paying guest*. The difference is a difference of style, or more exactly, of jargon. The interaction between X-phemism and jargon is something we pay close attention to in the book.

### 4. EUPHEMISTIC DYSPHEMISM AND DYSPHEMISTIC EUPHEMISM

These two phrases may seem self-contradictory, but in fact they are not: The expletive *Skit!*, which typically expresses anger, frustration, or anguish, is ordinarily a dysphemism. The question arises about how to classify its remodelled euphemisms *Sugar!* *Shoot!* or *Shivers!* Our feeling is that the locution is recognized as a euphemism even though the illocutionary act might be castigated as dysphemistic, consequently we dub these ‘euphemistic dysphemisms’. This term seems equally applicable to rather flippant terms like *doodle* ‘penis’, and some uses of rhyming slang like *jimmy-riddle* ‘piddle.’

The following terms for menstruation are hardly euphemisms, on the other hand they are not unquestionable dysphemisms either: *have the curse*, *woman's complaint*, *be feeling that way*, *off the roof*, etc. We therefore dub them 'dysphemistic euphemisms' for some occasions and (and straight dysphemisms on others, such as when a man is whingeing about the sexual unreceptiveness of his female partner). Other terms for menstruation such as *riding the red rag*, *flying the red flag*, etc., are either dysphemistic — or at best, dysphemistic euphemisms. With dysphemistic euphemisms, the locution is dysphemistic, but the illocution is not.

## 5. SUMMARY

Typical euphemisms are motivated by fear and/or distaste — both of which are driven by a desire not to offend; but, as we shall see, euphemisms are also motivated by the wish to display in-group identity markers, the wish to upgrade the denotatum, and even the wish to amuse. Many euphemisms seem to fall into more than one of these categories at the same time; e.g. *kick the bucket* is typically a flippant downgrading of death, a taboo topic normally feared; on other occasions, it can function as a dysphemism. For the time being, we may assume that a euphemism lacks at least the worst of the unpleasing connotations of the corresponding dispreferred term; whereas a dysphemism carries the unpleasing connotations that are lacking in its neutral (i.e. non-dysphemistic) counterpart — cf. the use of *tart* to refer just to a 'girl, woman'.

Like euphemisms, dysphemisms are motivated by fear and distaste, but also by hatred and contempt; and, in contrast to euphemisms, they are motivated by the desire to offensively demonstrate such feelings and to downgrade the denotatum or addressee (when deliberately used). Like euphemisms they may function as in-group identity markers and even to amuse an audience.

X-phemisms are members from a set of cross-varietal synonyms. They interact with style and jargon such that, on the one hand they define a style or jargon, and on the other are sometimes determined by the style or jargon adopted by the speaker.

Euphemistic dysphemisms and dysphemistic euphemisms have locutions which are at odds with their illocutionary point.

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