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Accepted version. *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 114, No. 4 (June 2013). DOI. © 2013 Springer
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Euphemism and Ethics: A Language-Centered Analysis of Penn State's Sexual Abuse Scandal

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Abstract: For 15 years, former assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky used his Penn State University perquisites to lure young and fatherless boys by offering them special access to one of the most revered football programs in the country. He repeatedly used the football locker room as a space to groom, molest, and rape his victims. In February 2001, an eye-witness alerted Penn State's top leaders that Sandusky was caught sexually assaulting a young boy in the showers. Instead of taking swift action against Sandusky, leaders began a cover-up that is considered one of the worst scandals in sports history. While public outcry has focused on the leaders' silence, we focus on the talk that occurred within the organization by key personnel. Drawing from court documents and internal investigative reports, we examine two euphemism clusters that unfolded in the scandal. The first cluster comprises reporting euphemisms, in which personnel used coded language to report the assault up the chain of command. The second cluster comprises responding euphemisms, in which Penn State's top leaders relied on an innocuous, but patently false, interpretation of earlier euphemisms as a decision-making

framework to chart their course of (in)action. We use this case to demonstrate how euphemistic language impairs ethical decision-making, particularly by framing meaning and visibility of acts, encouraging mindless processing of moral considerations, and providing a shield against psychological and material consequences. Further, we argue that euphemism may serve as a disguised retort to critical upward communication in organizations.

Keywords: ambiguity, critical upward communication, decision-making, ethics, euphemism, language, leadership, sexual abuse

In October 2012, former Penn State University assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky was sentenced to 30 to 60 years behind bars for the sexual abuse of ten boys (Levs & Dolan, 2012). Court reports show that for 15 years, Sandusky used his Penn State perquisites to lure young and fatherless boys by offering them tickets to football games, travel to bowl games, and special access to one of the most revered football programs in the country. He also used keys to the football program's facilities—including the locker room—to access spaces where he groomed, molested, and raped his victims. Although sexual assault against children is heinous enough on its own accord, what made the case arguably the worst scandal in sports history was the decade-long organizational cover-up that ran concurrently with Sandusky's pattern of abuse.

After the incidents of sexual assault came to light in November 2011, public outcry not only was directed against Sandusky, but also against Penn State's top leaders: university president Graham Spanier, senior vice president of finance and business Gary Schultz, athletic director Timothy Curley, and legendary head football coach Joseph Paterno. The central grievance was that these leaders were alerted to Sandusky's reprehensible behavior, concealed the facts, quashed proper criminal investigation, and protected the football program from bad publicity instead of protecting innocent and vulnerable children from further sexual abuse (Freeh, 2012). In fact, the cover-up, which began in 1998, has been argued to be a contributing factor to the prolonged nature of abuse and the expanded circle of Sandusky's victims (Freeh, 2012; Moushey & Dvorchak, 2012).

Much has been written already about the scandal: failures of leadership (Candiotti, Levs, & Ariosto, 2012; Wolverton, 2012), an organizational culture that privileged football over all else (Elvasky, 2012; Gregory & Webley, 2011), reliance on market values instead of educational values for structuring decision-making (Giroux & Giroux, 2012; Proffitt & Corrigan, 2012), and a code of silence that protected the university from bad publicity (Gutierrez & McLaren, 2012; Moushey & Dvorchak, 2012). Throughout nearly all popular and scholarly critiques, the question asked is, "Why didn't anyone speak up?" While it is true that Penn State personnel did not communicate suspected crimes to proper authorities, they *were* talking. What they were saying and how they were saying it played a pivotal role in how the situation unfolded, turning a "normal crime" into an organizational scandal (Altheide & Johnson, 2012).

In this essay, we foreground organizational talk about the accusations of abuse, focusing on language choices made by Penn State personnel and the resultant ethical consequences. By language choices, we refer to "discursive moves" that occur in several ways, including deliberate planning to gain control over meaning making in a particular context, spontaneous use of language that emerges through dialogue over time, and intentional reuse of specific language from previous emergent moves deemed successful (Moldoveanu, 2009). Therefore, while we cannot make claims as to the intentionality of the use of euphemism by Penn State personnel, we examine the ways in which euphemism ultimately was embedded in its particular context and functioned to shape reality and influence decision making (see Larsson & Lundholm, 2010). Specifically, we draw from court documents and investigative reports to trace how euphemistic language was used throughout the case and ensuing cover-up. We examine two euphemism clusters that unfolded in the scandal. The first cluster comprises reporting euphemisms, in which personnel used coded language to report the assault up the chain of command. The second cluster comprises responding euphemisms, in which Penn State's top leaders relied on an innocuous, but patently false, interpretation of earlier euphemisms as a decision-making framework to chart their course of (in)action. Ultimately, we assert that even though the horrific acts that took place on Penn State's campus were discussed internally, the interpersonal and organizational euphemisms

used to report and respond to accusations of sexual abuse— particularly the expression "horsing around"— impaired ethical decision-making, particularly by framing meaning and visibility of acts, encouraging mindless processing of moral considerations, and providing a shield against psychological and material consequences. We argue that euphemism may serve as a disguised retort to critical upward communication in organizations.

This article is organized as follows. To begin, we provide background on critical upward communication in organizations. From there, we review relevant literature on euphemism and explain how euphemism can contribute to making and justifying poor ethical choices. Next, we explain the methods we used to build and analyze the case. Then, we present our findings, starting with a brief summary of the communicative history of the Penn State sexual abuse scandal. We then expand on two main euphemism clusters: *reporting euphemisms*, those used by eye witnesses to report up the chain of command; and *responding euphemisms*, those used by key leaders during the (in)action that followed in subsequent years of the cover-up. Our findings offer important contributions to organizational euphemism research and implications for business ethics practice.

Critical Upward Communication and Ethics

While managers may espouse their appreciation for feedback from subordinates, that welcoming environment tends to apply more to good news than bad. Tourish and Robson (2006) explain that the prospect of sharing good news carries low-risk and high-reward. Therefore, subordinates are encouraged to share positive news up the chain of command and there is a strong upward flow of positive information. However, the converse is true as well. When the information a subordinate communicates is critical of management or includes information, however factual, that is antithetical to organizational goals or priorities, the message is far less well-received, creating a situation where sharing it carries high-risk and low-reward. Therefore, negative upward communication often is stifled and the flow is weak. Tourish and Robson refer to negative information that is transmitted by those without managerial power to those with such power as critical upward communication.

Research has shown that subordinates often are fearful of engaging in critical upward communication, with some of the most cited reasons for remaining silent being fear of being labeled as a troublemaker, concern for ruining relationships, fear of being punished, or concern about the organizational hierarchy or climate (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003). These concerns are not irrational. Organizations often penalize employees or resort to other kinds of behaviors that discourage employees from expressing dissent (Seeger & Ulmer, 2003; Tourish & Robson, 2006; Waldron & Kassing, 2011). But particularly in the case of problem-focused voice—which is an employee's expression of concern about work practices, incidents, or behaviors regarded as (potentially) harmful to the organization (Morrison, 2011)—speaking up can be constructive and benefit an organization in its decision-making.

When employees choose to share critical upward communication (which can be viewed as a form of dissent; see Kassing, 2011), how they express that information matters (Garner, 2012). Hierarchical relationships and face-management needs have a strong influence on how upward communication occurs in workplace settings. First, formal command structures in organizations (e.g., hierarchical supervisor-subordinate relationships) prescribe certain expectations for the form and content of communication (see Bisel, Messersmith, & Kelley, 2012), thereby fixing authority, acquiescence, and compliance (Bisel, Kelley, Ploeger, & Messersmith, 2011). Also, because of the power the supervisor holds over the subordinate, the stakes are higher for the subordinate to protect the relationship. Second, communicators tend to protect the face needs of conversational partners. In the case of negative messages, face needs are heightened as the content of the message typically are inherently face-threatening. But in the case of negative messages that also carry ethical implications, the face threats are heightened even further, as there may be an implied threat that the recipient is unethical. Therefore, there is a tendency to prioritize relationships by softening hurtful truths. A "moral mum effect" occurs when a communicator avoids describing a behavior in ethical terms or raising a moral objection to protect another's face needs (Bisel et al., 2011) and a "hierarchical mum effect" occurs when a subordinate engages in silence or equivocation in deference to a supervisor (Bisel et al., 2012).

More than simply softening the critical upward communication, these mum effects have important consequences for ethics. While Bisel et al. (2012) studied the ways in which subordinates failed to label unethical requests from superiors as unethical, their findings have import for critical upward communication that concerns ethical problems, as ethical issues are one of the key issues subordinates reported being unable to raise to superiors (Milliken et al., 2003). By not drawing attention to ethical concerns within a critical message, it creates a rhetorical absence that assigns a benign meaning to something potentially unethical and creates barriers to morally-informed decision making.

Euphemism and Ethics

At the outset, we note that our ethical position is informed by deontology. Deontological ethics asserts agents are responsible to uphold moral duties, including positive duties to do good and negative duties to avoid doing harm. Particular to the Penn State sexual abuse scandal, the ethical duties of the situation would be to take actions that remove victims from harm's way and prevent future abuse, as well as avoid actions that could put victims at further risk. While we acknowledge the actions taken by Penn State's leaders to handle the situation internally and not involve outside authorities could be viewed as ethical under a different frame (e.g., ethical egoism is the belief that agents should always act in their own best interest), in this article we judge the ethicality of actions and language choices by the extent to which they enabled and constrained the ability of agents to uphold positive and negative moral duties to the children abused by Sandusky.

Also, while we recognize that talk, decisions, and actions are not the same thing—"to talk is one thing; to decide is a second; to act is yet a third" (Brunsson, 2007, p.112), we take the view that language provides a frame that influences how decisions are made and ultimately what actions are taken or not taken. As Bisel and colleagues (2011) asserted, communication is complicit in organizational ethics as "communication itself is the behavior that imbues workplace (ethical or unethical) behavior with value" (p. 154). In organizational contexts, discursive moves shape realities for actors (Knights & Willmott, 1992;

Larsson & Lundholm, 2010; see also speech act theory, Austin, 1962). By foregrounding communication in our analysis, we recognize that language is a basic ontological condition (see Ashcraft, Kuhn & Cooren, 2009; Bisel, 2010) necessary for producing social reality (Rorty, 1967) and that actors draw upon established vocabularies when making sense of events (Rorty, 1989; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Once organizational actors arrive at a consensually-constructed meaning of a particular event, their shared meaning "serves as a springboard to action" (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 40). For our purposes, we focus on euphemism as the shared vocabulary that was drawn upon to make sense of accusations of abuse and coordinate organizational activity in response.

Euphemism is one of the oldest and most recognizable forms of language, having existed throughout human history (Allan & Burridge, 1991). Put simply, euphemism is "a word or phrase that is considered a more polite manner of referring to a topic than its literal designation" (McGlone, Beck, & Pfiester, 2006, p. 266). Common euphemisms in everyday situations include "using the restroom" rather than "urinating," and "he passed away" rather than "he died." In the business world, ostensibly more gentle terms soften painful or distasteful experiences: in job loss situations, managers describe the process of "right sizing" instead of firing people; in corporations, accountants speak of "pro forma financial statements" instead of "making your own accounting rules" (Stein, 1998; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004).

At a basic level, euphemism can serve positive ends. To begin, it is one means by which communicators demonstrate context-dependent sensibility and tact tailoring messages to various audiences (Fahnestock, 2011). Most frequently, inoffensive or pleasant terms are substituted for topics that are considered taboo or stigmatized in society—especially those related to sex, body parts, and bodily functions (Slovenko, 2001, 2005). For instance, excusing oneself from a dinner party to "use the restroom" is a polite way to omit unpleasant details about the reason for the absence. Euphemism also serves the purpose of minimizing face threat for speakers and their interlocutors (McGlone & Batchelor, 2003). Because people who discuss taboo topics run the risk of being negatively judged (e.g., impolite, inappropriate),

they may mitigate some of that negative judgment by downplaying their choice of topic with less offensive language (McGlone et al., 2006). Likewise, euphemism can be used to avoid offending the sensibilities of addressees, especially if they somehow are invoked by or affected by a taboo topic. Finally, communicators can draw upon euphemism to talk about unpleasant and unspeakable topics in ways that they may not have been able to without such substitutes. For example, in her study of Latina women's accounts of sexual violence in a legal setting, Trinch (2001) found that women often do not use the vivid word "rape" to describe what happened, but instead opt for euphemistic terms that still are descriptive enough to define the act. As such, euphemism holds the possibility of helping people to overcome inhibitions of talking about unpleasant topics (McGlone et al., 2006) and, therefore, open a space for dialogue.

But euphemism is not merely a polite form of talk; it is a powerful language tool or "injurious weapon" (Bandura, 1999, p. 195) that can have profound consequences (Stein, 1998). Euphemism can alter the visibility and meaning of the phenomena it signifies—which consequently can impede individuals from having full understanding of the gravity and moral implications of a situation. It can function in a metaphor-like fashion to frame personal and organizational decision-making, providing a way to short-circuit critical thinking and facilitate mindless decision-making without regard to ethical implications (Burgoon & Langer, 1995; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). It also can provide a shield behind which individuals can justify and/or deny their actions and silence reservations about moral wrongdoing (MacKenzie, 2000).

Changing Meanings and Visibility of the Signified

Euphemism raises ethical concerns because of its ability to cast behaviors, deeds, and events in ways that provide more favorable meanings. Given that euphemism is the replacement of repugnant language with more neutral terms (Stein, 1998), it serves to reason that euphemism can change the very meaning attached to the phenomenon it is meant to signify. Bandura (1999) maintains that "activities can take on very different appearances depending on what they are called" (p. 195). For instance, managers who terminate

employees are not cutting off paychecks and medical benefits without notice; they are "right sizing" their organizations. Mortgage lenders who sell subprime mortgages are not financially devastating families who cannot afford home ownership; they are "helping people get a piece of the American Dream" (for further discussion of several common euphemisms, see Bandura, 1999). In this sense, euphemism is more than just a face-saving way to broach an unpleasant act, but a way to make the act itself less unpleasant (McGlone et al., 2006; McGlone & Batchelor, 2003; Stein, 1998). Through euphemism, distasteful activities can lose their repugnancy, harmful conduct can be made respectable, and that which is socially unacceptable can be transformed into something socially approved (Bandura, 1999; Stein, 1998). This kind of meaning-making is part of the rationale behind McGlone et al.'s (2006) assertion that "we often use euphemisms to tell it like it isn't" (p. 261).

In addition to changing the meaning of a signified event (i.e., *how* an event is seen), euphemism can alter its visibility (i.e., the extent to which an event *can* be seen at all). Just as excusing oneself to "use the restroom" makes invisible (or at least less visible) bodily functions associated with that activity, euphemism has the power to background, conceal, and mask a variety of different deeds and behaviors (Stein, 1998). McGlone et al. (2006) describe euphemism as camouflage, saying, "euphemism succeeds as a discourse strategy in the same manner camouflage succeeds in its military mission—by rendering its subject as inconspicuous as possible in the surrounding context" (p. 263). Another way camouflaging alters the visibility of certain events is by affecting the extent to which events are remembered. McGlone et al. (2006) conducted a study that showed that when conventional, familiar euphemisms are used to describe a taboo event—as compared to describing the same event with an unfamiliar euphemism or with a non-euphemistic, literal description—subjects had a lower rate of recall for the taboo event. Put simply, it was easier to forget an event when it was described in euphemistic terms. It should not be surprising then that when euphemisms become commonplace (e.g., "creative accounting," "right sizing"), people no longer see the questionable behavior they were designed to disguise (Stein, 1998). When euphemism conceals truth that ought *not* remain

concealed, ethical problems arise (Gruner, Travillion, & Schaefer, 1991).

Framing Action and Encouraging Mindless Decision-Making

Language is a central mechanism for framing thinking, action, and decision-making (Bandura, 1999). Stein (1998) argues that euphemism "is as much a hard fact in decision making as are hard numbers" (p. 4). Euphemism can be a catalyst for unethical decision-making as it can hide ethical concerns, encourage mindless processing of decisions, and then commit those decisions into institutional memory, setting precedent for future (unethical) decisions to be made.

As described above, euphemism can alter the meaning and visibility of situations in such a way that ethical considerations are hidden from view. When this kind of reframing or sanitizing occurs, "we avoid the complexity inherent in ethical dilemmas and short-circuit our decision-making process" (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004, p. 228). Commonplace expressions, such as euphemism, can trigger mindlessness (see Burgoon & Langer, 1995) and consequently decrease the quality and ethicality of decision-making. Instead of making thoughtful decisions marked by careful deliberation of ethical considerations and moral responsibilities, decision makers rely on heuristic reasoning, snap judgments, and/or generalizations (Burgoon & Langer, 1995; McGlone et al., 2006). Furthermore, as decisions become highly routinized based on past practices in organizations and organizational members become psychologically numbed by repetition of words, phrases, and the meanings and actions they generate, the propensity for critical evaluation and thoughtful deliberation decreases even further. Mindless decision-making processes can get entrenched even deeper as euphemism-laced accounts become commonplace and unethical practices become "thoughtlessly routinized" (Bandura, 1999, p. 203).

Providing a Shield for One's Actions

Just as euphemism can be used as a framework to make decisions, it also can be used as a way to justify and/or deny decisions

already made or actions already taken. When unethical action already has occurred, euphemism provides a shield to protect individuals from the psychological consequences of those actions. Instead of acknowledging the possibility that an individual is not an ethical person, dealing with a host of negative emotions for having done wrong, and/or exposing oneself to repercussions for unethical decision-making, euphemism can be used to distance people from the role they played in immoral conduct and attempt to reduce personal responsibility for that action (Bandura, 1999; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004).

Stein (1998) explains that when unethical actions are taken, "things cannot and must not be called, or felt, what they are. To do so would bring on overwhelming guilt, anxiety, and remorse" (p. 30). Therefore, there is a tendency for individuals to engage in self-deception—a lack of awareness or acknowledgement that one is behaving unethically—as a way to reduce the dissonance experienced when there is a disconnect between their actions and identity (MacKenzie, 2000; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004) coin the term "ethical fading" to describe the psychological process by which ethical decisions are "bleached" of their moral implications, and outline the role of euphemisms in this process. Euphemism, by reframing meaning in more favorable terms or by rendering the ethics of the act invisible, function as an "ethical bleach" that washes out ethical implications. In this way, euphemisms act as "powerful tricksters" and "disguised stories" that can shield people from the motives for and consequences of their own actions (Stein, 1998; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). MacKenzie (2000) points to a dramatic example of this phenomenon. Adolph Eichmann, a key leader in the Holocaust, portrayed himself as innocent through the use of euphemisms. He drew heavily from the Third Reich's Language Rules, "which were the required use of euphemisms and code terms for killings and brutalities" (MacKenzie, 2000, p. 32). This example points to the utility of euphemism for recasting a narrative that is voided of ethical concerns and, once a narrative is neutralized, for distancing oneself psychologically from the consequences of actions and decisions.

In addition to psychological protection, euphemism also can act as a shield against material consequences of one's actions and decisions. Euphemisms, by their very nature, are ambiguous expressions. Whereas ambiguity can serve positive purposes (e.g., creating a space for unified diversity; see Eisenberg, 1984), it also can serve unethical ends. In particular, ambiguity created by euphemism can be used to escape blame, avoid responsibility, and create plausible deniability (Paul & Strbiak, 1997). For instance, plausible deniability makes it much more difficult to meet requirements for establishing burden of proof (Walton, 1996), which can dramatically influence outcomes of court cases. Regardless of whether the meaning of a signified phenomenon is understood, individuals can feign ignorance of a given situation by claiming they relied on alternative meanings of the euphemism in question. In this regard, people who have engaged in unethical behavior can be protected from material consequences such as criminal and civil liability and, therefore, not have to be held accountable for unethical actions.

In sum, euphemism can serve unethical, if not downright dangerous, ends. Euphemism has been described as exerting "a corrosive influence on communicative clarity" (McGlone et al., 2006, p. 276). In organizations, "bureaucratic-style euphemisms" are considered a form of deceptive organizational communication, which conceal or neutralize embarrassing and/or unpleasant deeds in attempts at "willful perversion of the truth" (Redding, 1996, p. 30). Euphemism can be used to reframe less-than-desirable phenomena as socially acceptable, to render ethical concerns invisible, to encourage mindless decision-making, and to justify and/or deny ethically questionable actions. It should not be surprising then that euphemism has been described as an "injurious weapon" (Bandura, 1999, p. 195) and a "form of violence" (Stein, 1998, p. 7). The injury and violence that can be leveraged by euphemism is vividly illustrated in the Penn State sexual abuse scandal, throughout which Penn State personnel reported and responded to accusations of child sexual abuse with euphemistic language.

Method

In this essay, we present a narrative of Penn State's internal communication that unfolded surrounding the Sandusky scandal. While there have been countless news reports and opinion pieces on the scandal—many of which have suggested evidence of an organizational cover-up—we base our analysis on the texts that most closely represent the original communicative exchanges between key personnel. These include the grand jury presentments which comprise summary testimony from victims, witnesses, and Penn State personnel called to testify, released in November 2011 (GJ1-2); Centre County court transcripts from Sandusky's criminal hearing in June 2012 (CC1-CC11); and Dauphin County court transcripts from Schultz and Curley's combined preliminary hearing on perjury and failure to report charges from December 2011 (DC). We also analyzed the Freeh Report, which is the 267-page commissioned investigative report released in July 2012 (FR), which includes copies of emails, meeting notes, handwritten notes between university leaders, typewritten correspondence, and other internal communication. In total, we combed through more than 2,500 pages of reports and transcripts. See Table 1 for complete citations of documents quoted in the analysis.

Also, given that Paterno testified in court only once before his death in January 2012, we turn to his posthumously published biography, *Paterno* (Posnanski, 2012), to provide further detail of what he may have said or heard about reports of sexual abuse by Sandusky. Because biographies present subjective and personal accounts of experiences (Schwandt, 2007), we took special precaution in drawing from Paterno's biography as a data source. We included in our case analysis only Paterno's recollections of his conversation with McQueary and excluded any of Posnanski's interpretation or personal insights that extended beyond the scope of Paterno's conversations with Penn State personnel. Given the brief conversations reported by Posnanski are consistent with Paterno's testimony to the grand jury, we judged the information as trustworthy.

The first phase of analysis was identifying the core data to be analyzed. We began this process by reading the documents in their

entirety to gain a holistic sense of the case—including the entirety of the criminal proceedings against Sandusky. Then, we uploaded the documents into Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software program that aids in data coding and retrieval (Weitzman & Miles, 1995) and can be used as a tool for data reduction. In this step, we winnowed the data (Wolcott, 1994) by coding each passage that represented a communicative exchange involving Penn State personnel, including codes for details such as parties involved, communication channel, and content of message. We paid particular attention to recollections of conversations between personnel, email messages, and other internal written records. The winnowing process significantly reduced the data by removing the bulk of testimony surrounding details of the sexual assaults, leaving a condensed dataset centered on Penn State's internal communication.

The next major phase of the analysis was building a time-ordered display matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Because of the flow of court proceedings, the chronology of events is not readily apparent simply by reading transcripts. For instance, a single witness typically provides initial testimony, is cross-examined, and then responds to a redirect. In each segment of questioning, events can be addressed multiple times and out of sequence. Additional witnesses each have a turn addressing the same sequence of events or different events that occurred before, during, and/or after other events previously described in testimony. Therefore, there is a "circling-back" pattern to testimony that creates overlapping and out-of-sequence timeline segments. Likewise, the organization of the Freeh Report was ordered in such a way that many of the appendices (including copies of internal communication) were not presented in chronological order. Furthermore, sources revealed unique information about different communicative exchanges, requiring that evidence be merged from multiple sources into a single timeline. Therefore, we reorganized all coded passages from all sources into a matrix that was ordered by date of occurrence and listed all details (quotations, communicators, citation information) for each utterance.

The final phase of analysis involved analyzing the time-ordered display as a text. We read through the data looking for patterns in the communicative exchanges. This process involved iterative processes of

coding for deeper meaning (e.g., recurrent phrases, emotional states) and theoretical memoing that captured impressions and established connections between codes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). We also contextualized the data by returning to original sources to gather additional details surrounding exchanges. Following the outline provided by time-ordered display and in light of the key findings of our language-based analysis, we reconstruct the case below, framing the retelling with a particular focus on the communicative handling of the case rather than the abuse itself.

As a caveat, we must note that because the accounts presented here are drawn primarily from court transcripts, the accuracy of these recollections is debatable—especially considering that Curley, Schultz, and Spanier are facing charges of perjury. Additionally, some of the language used throughout the hearings likely resulted from coaching by attorneys (both for the prosecution and defense) and/or the language culture of the courtroom; likewise, some of language used in the unfolding of the case may have resulted from advice by university counsel.¹ Yet, there appears to be striking agreement between parties about the essence of what was said and not said, particularly in regard to the euphemisms favored by all parties. While we cannot speculate on what language was shaped by the legal system, we do compensate for the limitation of retrospective accounts by presenting all available recollections of specific conversations.

A Communicative History of the Penn State Scandal

The grand jury presentments and criminal trial testimony against Jerry Sandusky contain lurid and heart-wrenching details of more than a decade of sexual assaults against young boys, many of which occurred on Penn State's campus and/or in association with the school's football program. The point of this essay is not to rehearse the charges of abuse, but instead to show how key leaders in the Penn State system *communicated about* the abuse of which they were aware. Based on court testimony and the independent investigation, there are three known incidents that came to the attention of Penn State staff and administrators. In May 1998, a woman reported to Penn State police department that Sandusky had showered with her 11 year-old son and touched him inappropriately (i.e., hugging and

lifting him up while both were naked). A campus police investigation was launched, but no formal charges were filed (FR, pp. 41-47). In fall 2000, janitor Jim Calhoun relayed to coworkers that he had witnessed Sandusky performing oral sex on a young boy in the showers. At the time, coworkers convinced Calhoun not to report the abuse up the chain of command for fear that they would lose their jobs (FR, pp. 65-66). Then, on February 9, 2001, graduate assistant Michael McQueary witnessed Sandusky sexually assaulting a young boy in the football locker room. His reporting of the incident to Paterno, and eventually to Curley and Schultz, initiated a chain of (in)action that is at the center of the trials. Therefore, it is communication about this third incident that is the focus of our analysis.

Horsing Around: Euphemism and Inaction at Penn State

One of the key contentions throughout the criminal trials is the extent to which Penn State leaders knew about what happened in the showers. While it is agreed by all parties that McQueary had reported some sort of incident, there is debate as to what *exactly* he had reported. The interpretations range from McQueary's account of sexual intercourse with a minor to Curley, Schultz, and Spanier's account of Sandusky simply "horsing around." Below, we trace the evolution of euphemisms up the chain of command and then ultimately used by Penn State's top leaders to chart their course of (in)action.

There were two central euphemism clusters. The first cluster of *reporting euphemisms* was used to describe the sexual assault witnessed by McQueary and how his observation was reported to Penn State leaders. The second cluster of *responding euphemisms* deals with language used by Curley, Schultz, and Spanier in their organizational response to disciplining Sandusky and deciding not to report to authorities for further action, but instead to bar "guests" from using university facilities. See Table 2 for a summary. Here, we provide more detail of the sequence of events by examining the specific language used in the reporting. Euphemisms are marked in italics and should not be interpreted as emphasis of text, unless specifically noted.

Reporting Euphemisms: Moving Bad News Up the Chain of Command

In February 2001, McQueary entered the Penn State football locker room late on a Friday night. According to court testimony he instantly was alerted to the presence of other people by the sounds of running water and "skin-on-skin smacking sounds" (CC4, p. 192). Although flustered, he looked into the showers and witnessed "Coach Sandusky's arms wrapped around the boy's midsection in the very, very, very—the closest proximity that I think you could be in" (CC4, pp. 193-194). He slammed his locker door shut as loudly as possible to alert Sandusky to his presence and in an attempt to communicate "Someone is here. Break it up. Please" (CC4, p. 198). McQueary and Sandusky made direct eye contact, but McQueary said nothing to him. Instead, he promptly left the locker room and retreated to his personal office on another floor of the building to call his father, John McQueary, for advice on how to proceed.

Because McQueary said nothing to Sandusky, the first actual talk about the shower incident occurred when McQueary spoke with his father by phone. When asked by his father what was wrong, McQueary provided an emotional and euphemistic response. John McQueary recounted the conversation this way:

He says, "I saw Coach Sandusky *in the shower with a little boy.*" He says, "first I heard it and," he said, "I knew that *something was going wrong.*" And he said, "I followed—looked into the locker room and saw him there *with a little boy.*" (DC, pp. 143)

McQueary drove to his father's home that evening where he further discussed the incident with his father and a family friend, Jonathan Dranov. McQueary's account of his discussion with his father reflected nearly identical euphemistic language: "I said I just saw Coach Sandusky *in the showers with a boy* and what I saw was wrong and sexual." In both accounts, the actual words were "in the shower[s] with a boy." While it may be inferred that there was something sexual occurring (and McQueary's testimony claims that he used the word sexual), "with a boy" is euphemistic and leaves much room for ambiguity; the only thing unequivocal was that Sandusky was not

alone. Being "with" someone could be purely innocent (e.g., an adult and child showering after a workout), predatory (as McQueary testified in court), or anywhere in between.

McQueary was advised by his father to contact Paterno and report the incident. The following morning, McQueary called Paterno at home and told him he had something important to tell him. Paterno initially attempted to halt communication, saying, "I don't have a job for you. And if that's what it's about, don't bother coming over." When McQueary assured him that it was not about a job, Paterno relented. McQueary drove to Paterno's home, where he relayed to Paterno in a 10-minute conversation what he had witnessed the night before. Paterno's recollection of the conversation was retold by his biographer: "Paterno remembered McQueary's nervousness more vividly than anything else. He remembered telling McQueary more than once to calm down as they sat at the kitchen table, McQueary had a hard time catching his breath" (Posnanski, 2012, p. 271). Whether it was because of the emotionality of witnessing an assault, the fear of reporting bad news upward, or the face threat involved in discussing a taboo topic, McQueary was not very direct. McQueary's recollection of the words he relayed to the coach were similar to those he shared with his father: "[I said] I had saw Jerry *with a young boy in the shower* and that it was *way over the lines*" (DC, p. 24).

Again, McQueary's language was euphemistic. But he assumed that its meaning was clear. "I had told him—and I want to make sure I'm clear—I told him what I had seen, again, on the surface. I made sure he knew it was sexual and that it was wrong, and there was no doubt about that. I did not go into *gross detail* about the actual act" [emphasis added] (CC4, p. 205). But while McQueary testified that he has "no doubt" (CC4, p. 205) he saw Sandusky engaged in intercourse with the young boy, those were not the words he used. His intent to make sure Paterno "knew it was wrong" did not match his tentative and ambiguous language choices. McQueary explained, "I didn't feel comfortable using those terms ["anal sex"] and I didn't explain those details or use those terms in talking with those men [Paterno, John McQueary] out of respect and probably my own embarrassment, to be frank with you" (CC4, pp. 205-206). Repeatedly, McQueary emphasized that it was respect for Paterno that caused him to dilute

his language choices—even though he believed Paterno "needed" and "deserved" to know about the assault. McQueary says, "Out of respect and just not getting into detail with someone like Coach Paterno. I would not have done it" (DC, p. 25). When pressed further, McQueary still held to the belief that it was better to be euphemistic than clear. For example, when asked whether he used the term "anal intercourse," McQueary said, "I gave a brief description of what I saw. You don't—ma'am—you don't go to Coach Paterno or at least in my mind I don't go to Coach Paterno and go into great detail of sexual acts. I would have never done that with him ever" (DC, pp. 73-74). In cross-examination, McQueary admitted to avoiding less ambiguous terms including "sodomy," "anal intercourse," "anal sodomy," "anal," "anal sex," "crime," "assault," "rape," or "intercourse" (DC, pp. 25, 71-72, 102). He qualified the specificity of his report, saying that he "*probably* used the word sexual" [emphasis added] (DC, p. 102). Despite his use of euphemism and avoidance of more direct language, McQueary insisted that Paterno understood it was sexual in nature.

Paterno claimed otherwise. In his grand jury testimony, Paterno relayed his understanding of the report, saying, "Well, he had seen a person, an older—not an older, but a mature person who was fondling, whatever you might call it—I'm not sure what the term would be—a young boy" (DC, p. 175). When asked if "fondling" was the actual term used, Paterno revealed the ambiguous nature of McQueary's account: "Well, I don't know what you would call it. Obviously, he [Sandusky] was *doing something with the youngster*. It was a sexual nature. I'm not sure exactly what it was" (DC, p. 175). Despite not understanding what McQueary was reporting (i.e., fondling and raping are different acts), Paterno did nothing to clarify his understanding because of the discomfort of the situation. In his grand jury testimony, he explained:

I didn't push Mike to describe exactly what it was because he was very upset. Obviously, I was in a little bit of a dilemma since Mr. Sandusky was not working for me anymore. So I told—I didn't go any further than that except I knew Mike was upset and I knew *some kind of inappropriate action was being taken* by Jerry Sandusky with a youngster. (DC, pp. 175-176)

Speaking to his biographer, Paterno discussed what he took away from the conversation. He said, "I thought he saw them *horsing around*."

Maybe he thought he saw some fondling. I don't know about any of this stuff." (Posnanski, 2012, p. 272). Instead of trying to ascertain exactly what McQueary had witnessed, verifying whether a young boy was indeed fondled (or raped, as McQueary's court room testimony indicates) in a locker room, or demanding that McQueary be more direct in his report, Paterno responded by simply stopping the conversation. Paterno said, "I told him he didn't have to tell me anything else" (Posnanski, 2012, p. 272) and "You did what was right; you told me" (DC, p. 176). The conversation ended when Paterno thanked McQueary for reporting what he had witnessed and promised him that he would take care of it.

The next step in the chain of command for reporting the assault fell to Paterno. Sometime that weekend, Paterno contacted athletic director Curley, and arranged a meeting for Sunday, February 11, in which he informed Curley and vice president Schultz of McQueary's report. Paterno recalled his initial report to Curley: "I called him and I said, 'hey, we got a problem,' and I explained the problem to him" (DC, p. 177). Paterno was not asked to recount to the grand jury exactly how he described the "problem," but instead simply agreed that he "passed along substantially the same information that Mr. McQueary had given" him (DC, p. 177). Schultz recalled the conversation this way: "He indicated that someone observed *some behavior* in the football locker room *that was disturbing*" (DC, p. 206). Curley described the encounter with Paterno being a face-to-face meeting with Paterno, Curley, and Schultz. According to Curley, Paterno reported that an assistant football coach went into the locker room in the evening and that "the individual heard and saw, I guess, *two people in the shower*, in the shower area... He was uncomfortable with that and at that point he felt it was something he should report to Coach Paterno. Coach Paterno relayed that information to Gary [Schultz] and I" (DC, p. 181). Curley's use of "two people in the shower" camouflages any suspicion of sexual assault. As further evidence of the invisibility of euphemism, the attorney (for the prosecution) seemed satisfied with Curley's vague response and did not ask him to elaborate any further.

Yet, Curley and Schultz must have understood the coded, euphemistic language to be something more insidious than two people

simply showering together. On Sunday, February 11, shortly after hearing Paterno's second-hand account, Schultz contacted attorney Wendell Courtney—who was the independent legal counsel for Penn State *and* The Second Mile (the nonprofit organization for underprivileged youth, of which Sandusky was the founder)—to seek counsel on "reporting of suspected child abuse" (FR, Exhibit 5A). Then the following day, Monday, Schultz and Curley called a "heads up" meeting with Spanier to alert him of the situation. Spanier said in a prepared written statement, "The report was that Jerry Sandusky was seen in an athletic locker room facility *showering with one of his Second Mile youth*, after a workout, and that they were *"horsing around"* (or *"engaged in horseplay"*)" (FR, Exhibit 2J).

Spanier asserted that he asked two follow-up questions: "are you sure that is how it was described to you, as *horsing around*?" and "are you sure that that is all that was reported?" (FR, Exhibit 2J). Even though Spanier is being charged with perjury and this particular statement is a key point of contention, it is indeed plausible that Curley and Schultz reported someone had witnessed Sandusky "horsing around" with another young boy in the shower. Spanier's response suggests a desire to hide behind coded, euphemistic language. Instead of asking questions to clarify (e.g., "What do you mean "horsing around"? "If all that happened is innocent 'horsing around,' why are you telling me about it?" "What other details were reported?"), Spanier accepted the euphemism for its most innocuous meaning.

Curley and Schultz also scheduled a meeting with McQueary to hear his account of the event directly. In the estimated 15-minute meeting, which was held approximately February 20, McQueary claimed, "I told them that I saw Jerry *in the showers with a young boy* and that what I had seen was extremely sexual and *over the lines* and it was wrong" (DC, p. 32). When pressed further, McQueary said, "I would have said that Jerry was in there in *very close proximity behind a young boy* with his arms wrapped around him.... I would have said I heard slapping sounds.... I would have made it clear that it was in the shower and they were naked" (DC, pp. 33-34). Although McQueary was clear in his testimony—at least in regard to what he *would* have said (his peculiar phrasing "I would have said," which is not typical of

how he talked in the rest of his testimony, raises some doubts as to whether he actually vocalized some of the details)—he equivocated about his language choices. "Again, I would not have used some of the words that you previously mentioned ["sodomy," "anal intercourse"], but I would have described that it was extremely sexual and that I thought that some kind of intercourse was going on" (DC, p. 34).

Curley's account of McQueary's side of the story was quite different. He said, "My recollection was that Mike could hear there were people in, they were in the shower area, that they were *horsing around*, that they were *playful*, and that it just did not feel appropriate" (DC, p. 183). He continued to paint a picture of behavior that, while perhaps immature, was not sexual. In fact, when asked if the conduct reported was that of a sexual nature, Curley flatly denied that McQueary reported "any kind" of sexual contact (DC, p. 184). Instead he replied, "My recollection was that they were *kind of wrestling*, there was *body contact*, and they were *horsing around*" (DC, p. 184). In comparison, Schultz said of the same conversation, "I believe that he said that he saw *something that he felt was inappropriate between Jerry and a boy*" (DC, p. 226). He, too, denied explicit claims of sexual abuse had been made by McQueary, asserting that the reports received by both Paterno and McQueary were very general and lacking details. Schultz claimed that he concluded from the meeting with McQueary that "I had the impression that it was inappropriate.... I had the feeling that there was perhaps some kind of *wrestling around* activity and maybe Jerry might have grabbed the young boy's genitals or something of that sort is kind of the impression that I had" (DC, p. 211). Even though he acknowledged that there may have been genital contact, Schultz denied there were sexual overtones. Instead, he chocked it up to Sandusky's tendency to be a clown and "the kind of horsing around that he does" (DC, p. 226):

You know, I don't know what sexual conduct's definition to be, but I told you that my impression was—you know, Jerry was the kind of guy that he regularly kind of like physically wrestled people. He would punch you in the arm. He would slap you on the back. He would grab you and get you in a headlock, etc. That was a fairly common *clowning around* thing. I had the impression that maybe something like that was going on in the locker room and perhaps in the course of that, that somebody

might have grabbed the genitals, that Jerry might have grabbed the genitals of the young boy. I had no impression that it was anything more serious than that. That was my impression at the time. (DC, p. 223-224)

The meeting between the three men was brief. Despite calling McQueary in for the specific purpose of learning what he saw, there was no indication that Curley and Schultz took the matter seriously. All parties involved—McQueary, Schultz, and Curley—agreed that euphemistic language ruled the encounter. Specifically, Schultz and Curley allowed McQueary's euphemistic language to go unchecked. They did not ask perception-checking questions to confirm their personal assessments of the situation. And most troubling of all, Schultz got an impression from talking to McQueary that Sandusky may have touched a boy's genitals, but did not seek more information from the very eye witness who could have given the necessary insight to help them determine the best course of action. Instead, Penn State's top leaders concluded the meeting by reassuring McQueary that "they thought it was serious, what I was saying, and that they would investigate it or look into it closely, and they said they would follow-up with me" (DC, p. 35).

Throughout the reporting of sexual abuse, all parties appeared threatened by the details they had to reveal. As a result, rather than speaking plainly and unequivocally about accusations of abuse, Penn State personnel relied on the euphemism "horsing around," a seemingly innocent term denoting rough or boisterous play. Notably, it is not fully clear how or when the euphemism first emerged—or who was the first to utter the expression. While the first record in court testimony and investigative reports indicates its appearance at the February 12 meeting when Curley and Schultz first reported to Spanier that Sandusky was caught "horsing around" or "engaged in horseplay," it is conceivable that Paterno was the individual responsible for introducing the euphemism. Paterno recounted to his biographer that he concluded after his meeting with McQueary on February 10 that he thought that McQueary saw Sandusky and a child "horsing around." Given the vague testimony Paterno later provided in court with regard to the words he used to report to his superiors (i.e., he simply agreed that he reported basically the same information McQueary had given

him), perhaps "horsing around" had taken hold prior to its first officially recorded use.

Regardless, by the time the Curley and Schultz went back to McQueary for a first-hand account of what happened, they were no longer looking to learn what had happened. They simply were seeking confirmation of their euphemism "horsing around" and its most innocuous possible interpretation. The course of (in)action that was already being put into place was dependent upon that shared interpretation—or at least a plausible account of that shared interpretation, which functioned as a sensemaking vocabulary for understanding the events (see Rorty, 1989; Weick et al., 2005). Then, absent any unvarnished and unambiguous details from McQueary, Curley and Schultz had the wiggle room necessary to claim their preferred meaning of the euphemism and chart their course of action.

Responding Euphemisms: Leaders Determining Course of (In)Action

A second cluster of euphemisms used throughout the organizational response was just as problematic as the euphemisms used to describe the sexual assault itself. Following the initial reporting of the sexual assault by Curley and Schultz to Spanier on February 12, the three leaders held a follow-up meeting on February 25, in which handwritten notes indicated a course of action was decided. The action plan included informing the chair of The Second Mile, reporting to the Department of Welfare, and "Tell[ing] J.S. to avoid *bringing children alone* into Lasch Bldg" (FR, Exhibit 5E). A follow-up email written on February 26 by Schultz to Curley and Spanier reiterated the basic plan, stating the need to "talk with the subject [Sandusky] ASAP regarding the future *appropriate use of the University facility*" (FR, Exhibit 5E).

On February 27, Curley responded to Schultz and Spanier, indicating that he talked with Paterno and proposed a different course of action that struck external reporting from the plan. He said:

I am uncomfortable with what we agreed were the next steps. I am having trouble with going to everyone, but the person involved [Sandusky]. I think I would be more comfortable

meeting with the person and tell him about the information we received....I will let him know that his *guests* are not permitted to use our facilities. (FR, Exhibit 5G)

Curley's hesitancy to communicate the accusation to external organizations (which have power over Penn State leaders), is akin to the hesitancy that subordinates may experience in reporting critical upward communication. Spanier agreed with Curley's assessment and empathized with his discomfort. He endorsed Curley's new plan, saying, "It [the revised plan] requires you to go a step further and means that your conversation will be all the more difficult, but I admire your willingness to do that and I am supportive" (FR, Exhibit 5G). Schultz endorsed the plan as well.

In his prepared written statement, Spanier described reiterated the preferred euphemistic language proposed by Curley:

I asked that Tim [Curley] meet with Sandusky to tell him that he must never again *bring youth into the showers*. We further agreed that we should inform the Second Mile president that we were directing Jerry accordingly and furthermore that we did not wish Second Mile youth *to be in our showers*. (FR, Exhibit 2J)

Schultz also used the pervasive euphemism that emphasized proper use of facilities, saying, "I think we decided it would be appropriate to just say to Jerry that you shouldn't be *bringing the Second Mile kids onto campus in the football building*" (DC, p. 212).

One of the critiques launched by the Freeh Report was that Curley, Schultz, and Spanier used "generic references" and "code" words in their emails when discussing the Sandusky incident (FR, p. 73). But what is particularly striking about their euphemistic language is not just that it was vague (i.e., avoiding putting specific details into writing, including names), but that their particular choice of euphemism removed any suggestion of criminal activity and radically shifted the frame of culpability. Whereas McQueary's report of sexual assault in euphemistic terms (e.g., "with a boy", "over the lines") may have obfuscated the criminality and severity of what he had witnessed, Curley, Schultz, and Spanier's euphemistic language shifted the wrongdoing from Sandusky assaulting young children (on campus and

elsewhere) to improper use of university facilities. The problem was reframed as Sandusky bringing "children alone into the Lasch Building," Sandusky not engaging in "appropriate use of the University facility," and his "guests" gaining unauthorized access to facilities.

Additionally, these euphemisms removed any remaining attention away from the victim and his needs for protection and support. Their choice of words rebranded Sandusky's victim as a *guest*—and an unauthorized one at that—who took advantage of Penn State football facilities. In this way, the boy was a conspirator alongside Sandusky. The boy did not pay an admission fee to use the equipment and could potentially be seen at greater fault because he, unlike Sandusky, was not an authorized user of the facility. Moreover, talking about Sandusky's "guests" and "children," both in the plural, further anonymized the victim from the night of February 9, 2001. The boy no longer was a particular victim who had to be identified and helped, but one of many possible "freeloaders" who had to be stopped from gaining a benefit not due to them. In effect, the euphemism positioned Penn State University as the party being put at risk and/or harmed.

The meeting between Curley and Sandusky was scheduled for March 5, nearly a full month after McQueary initially reported the assault. In court testimony, Curley recalled his conversation with Sandusky:

When I met with Jerry, because I was uncomfortable with the information we received, I indicated to him that in addition to reporting it to the executive director of the Second Mile, that I did not want him *using our athletic facilities for workout purposes and bringing any young people with him*. He was *not to use our facilities with young people*." (DC, p. 186)

Penn State's General Counsel's notes from a March 2011 conversation with Spanier reflect that Spanier "[b]umped into Tim Curley and Tim advised that he had a conversation with Sandusky *not to bring children into the shower again*" (FR, p. 77).

There were two elements of the response were particularly troubling. First, the mandate to Sandusky was not to stop sexually

abusing children, but to stop "showering with" them or "using our athletic facilities for workout purposes." Again, as it is presented, the problem is framed as Sandusky and his guests taking unfair advantage of Penn State facilities. The euphemism camouflaged the real reason behind the prohibition and removed ethical judgment from the situation. Second, there was a lack of urgency in disciplining Sandusky that can be traced back to euphemism. If the problem was that Sandusky's "horsing around" could be putting himself and/or a child at risk of a slip and fall accident, it was an issue that could have been handled properly with low urgency and a casual meeting. If the problem was that Sandusky was inviting his "guests" to "use" university facilities in an inappropriate and unauthorized way, it was an issue that could have been handled properly with low urgency and a casual meeting—or avoided altogether if deemed there was not enough harm to the university to warrant addressing the problem. But the real issue was that Sandusky was sexually abusing boys on Penn State property. Therefore, it was an issue that required immediate, decisive action and required reporting to outside authorities for further investigation

Furthermore, the proposed prohibition was highly ineffectual. Because of the euphemistic language of not "bringing children to the shower" and intentionally circumventing any mention of sexual abuse, there was no way to create a common understanding or communicate the gravity of the prohibition. The order was not truly enforceable as only Sandusky and a few administrators who rarely, if ever, were in the football facilities were aware of the prohibition. Individuals who could have helped to enforce the ban (e.g., janitors, assistant coaches, other athletics staff) were not informed of it. Schultz described the enforcement mechanism as the "honor system" and said that Curley trusted Sandusky to obey the request (DC, p. 234).

Unfortunately, but perhaps not surprisingly, the euphemisms favored by Curley, Schultz, and Spanier were lost on Sandusky. According to Sandusky's attorney, Curley and Sandusky had a conversation in which they discussed the prohibition on taking children into the showers on campus:

Sandusky's counsel said Curley told Sandusky that they had heard Sandusky had *been in the shower with a young child*, and

someone felt this was inappropriate. According to Sandusky's counsel, Curley never used the word "sex" or "intercourse" during the discussion. Counsel said Sandusky offered to give the child's name to Curley, but Curley did not accept this invitation. Counsel also said Curley told Sandusky he did not want Sandusky to bring *children to the shower* any more. Sandusky's counsel said no one accused Sandusky of abusing kids. (FR, p. 77)

In a final step, Curley met with The Second Mile executive director Jack Raykovitz sometime in March. In that meeting, Curley reported that someone had seen Sandusky in the locker room with a young boy and was "uncomfortable" with the situation. Curley told Raykovitz that he had discussed the incident with Sandusky and determined that nothing inappropriate had occurred that that it was a "non-issue;" however, to avoid the risk of bad publicity, Sandusky would no longer be permitted to bring children onto the Penn State campus. Curley asked Raykovitz to emphasize the prohibition to Sandusky (FR, pp. 64, 78). Yet, when Raykovitz repeated the prohibition of bringing children on campus, Sandusky retorted that it applied only to the locker rooms (FR, p. 78).

Contrary to the original plan that proposed making an official report to the Department of Public Welfare (and in opposition to state law that mandates reporting of suspected child abuse to law enforcement; see Cons. Stat. Tit. 23, § 6311), no additional reports were made by Penn State leaders and, for all intents and purposes, the case was closed. The decision not to report the assault witnessed and reported by McQueary is a key issue in the criminal prosecution of Curley, Schultz, and Spanier for failure to report, endangering the welfare of a child, obstructing administration of law, and criminal conspiracy. The three men attempted to shield themselves and their inaction by the euphemistic language. For example, when asked in court if there was a conversation about whether to go to law enforcement, Curley responded, "At the time I don't recall that because, again, I didn't feel—at least I didn't feel personally that any criminal activity had occurred" (DC, p. 199). Likewise, Schultz offered similar reasoning for failure to refer the case to the police. He said, "My recollection was that he [McQueary] was uncomfortable they were in the shower and it was just the two of them [Sandusky and the boy]

and that they were *horsing around* and inappropriate conduct." Schultz concluded, "There was no indication that it was [criminal]" (DC, p. 231).

The extent of ethical fading enabled by euphemism in the case can be seen in how Curley defended himself and his decisions. When pushed to explain why an act that he did not view as criminal was reported to The Second Mile, Curley stated, "based on what I heard that was reported to me, I just didn't feel it was appropriate that Jerry would be in a shower area with a young person. Whether it was *horsing around* or however you want to describe it. I just didn't think that would be appropriate and shouldn't occur" (DC, p. 200). He defended his entire course of action, drawing from the same euphemism:

I was not aware of anything sexual. So I didn't feel that it warranted that [police investigation] and I felt my actions were appropriate. But I was not aware that there was sexual activity. [Q: If you didn't think this was sexual in nature or criminal in nature, then why did you take the action of barring Sandusky from bringing youths onto the university property?] Because I didn't think it was appropriate that he would be using our facilities, having young people in there in the evening, and that you're in a shower area *horsing around* with a young person. (DC, p. 197)

Paterno, too, defended his inaction by recounting to his biographer that if McQueary had told him he saw Sandusky *raping* a young boy, "We would have gone to the police right then and there, no questions asked" (Posnanski, 2012, p. 277).

Despite their protestations that they would have done the right thing if they had only known the truth, the bitter tragedy here is that all these men appear to have known that it was more than "horsing around." Paterno, Curley, Schultz, and Spanier were well aware of the 1998 case where Sandusky had been reported to the police for showering with and inappropriately touching a young boy. Although no criminal charges were pressed in that case, a 95-page police report was filed and red flags were raised. At the time of McQueary's report, Schultz contacted police chief Tom Harmon to check on the records of that case (FR, Exhibit 5D). Schultz immediately contacted the

university's outside legal counsel, Wendell Courtney, to have a conference on "reporting of suspected child abuse" (FR, p. 69, Exhibit 5A). They hid files in their offices. They communicated in coded language in their emails. But over time, as the case grew colder, ethical concerns faded even further from view. Through euphemism, the leaders found ways to justify their actions and inactions, ways to justify their interpretation. Tragically, between February 2001 when the crime was first reported to when the criminal charges were launched and Sandusky was arrested, at least two more boys were assaulted by Sandusky in the Penn State locker room and another four boys at locations off of Penn State's campus. Sandusky may have stopped taking "guests" to the showers, but it did not stop his criminal behavior.²

Discussion

By situating language in a central position in our analysis, we demonstrate that the specific words people use are of utmost consequence for ethical action (see Bisel et al., 2011; MacKenzie, 2000; Redding, 1996). The findings of this study provide evidence of the central role euphemism played in a decade-long cover-up of the sexual abuse scandal at Penn State University. We described how euphemistic language was used to shield an eye-witness from personal embarrassment and emotional discomfort when reporting what he saw, and then how euphemisms were co-opted by top leaders to justify a chain of (in)action that protected them from the rational discomfort provoked by legal risks and moral obligations of responding to sexual abuse charges. In short, euphemism was used to protect Penn State's personnel and the organization at large—even though it came at the expense of leaving boys in harm's way.

Although reporting of abuse followed a proper internal chain of command—with the glaring omission of filing a police report—there was a serious and significant breakdown in communication whereby the essence of the message was lost and/or (perhaps willfully) distorted. In particular, the euphemism "horsing around" played a pivotal role in how the case unfolded over time. From the very beginning, McQueary spoke in face-saving, euphemistic terms as he reported the assault he had witnessed to Paterno. Even though it was

understood at the time that the action was "inappropriate" and likely sexual, there was much ambiguity in the words used. The ambiguity was reflected in Paterno's confusion over what happened, as he testified in court that it was "fondling, whatever you might call it" and then recounted to his biographer that he understood McQueary's report to be that Sandusky and the boy were "horsing around." Paterno, highly uncomfortable with discussing the taboo topic, relayed McQueary's report to Curley and Schultz, who in turn reported it to Spanier.

Curley, Schultz, and Spanier then co-opted the "horsing around" euphemism with dire consequence. They framed the official organizational response around an innocuous—yet patently false—interpretation that Sandusky simply showered with a boy after hours and engaged in "horseplay." Certainly horseplay is inappropriate and could pose undue risks to the university: someone could get hurt (e.g., slip and fall on the wet floor) and an adult being alone in a shower with an underage male could open up the risk for (false) allegations of improper conduct. Consequently, leaders' ensuing use of euphemisms such as "appropriate use of facilities" and "guests" framed their concern around risk management for the university and abuse of Penn State's facilities, not the sexual abuse of a boy.

But it is patently obvious that the boy with Sandusky was not a *guest*. He was a *victim* of sexual assault on Penn State's campus by a person who, although no longer technically employed by the university, still retained official affiliation. By acknowledging the boy in this scenario as a victim instead of a euphemistic "guest"—interchangeable with any other person who might enter the football facilities—the criminality of the case is foregrounded and ethical and legal obligations of the university can no longer be faded from view. Penn State leaders had an immediate, pressing, and non-negotiable duty to respond. The laws in the state of Pennsylvania required that they report the suspected abuse of a minor to the police. Penn State University policies required them to identify the victim, provide support services, and be an advocate for the victim. Additionally, Curley, Schultz, and Spanier were required to cooperate with subpoenas and other police investigations; to cooperate with external child welfare organizations and their independent investigations; and

to testify in court to what they knew. Most importantly, they had a duty—if not legally, at least morally—to act swiftly to ensure that the child was clear of immediate harm and to take decisive actions to prevent any future harm. Yet none of these things occurred. Emails were sent, meetings were held, attorneys were consulted, and one month after the initial report, Curley simply asked Sandusky in a private meeting not to bring underage guests for workouts and showers—a banal and euphemistic request enforceable only by the honor system.

Yes, the silence and cover-up of the abuse committed by Sandusky was scandalous. But so, too, was Penn State leaders' use of euphemism. In fact, euphemism may have done even more damage than silence. Silence quashed proper criminal investigation and, at least for a while, protected the university from bad publicity and shielded leaders from public scrutiny (Freeh, 2012). But the use of euphemism appears to have silenced the quiet voices, too—those voices of conscience that sit on the shoulders of people who could have spoken up, who could have stopped the abuse sooner. By reframing the meaning of the initial report into something more palatable, euphemism silenced the voices that said "this behavior is criminal." By encouraging mindless decision-making, it silenced the voices that asked "are we doing the right thing for all parties involved?" and "what are the ethical implications of our choices?" By providing a psychological shield for wrongdoing, it silenced the voices that whispered at night "it's not too late to speak up." In short, it was euphemism that enabled leaders to act unethically and to deceive themselves that they had behaved appropriately.

Moreover, we argue that euphemism—whether as a deliberate or emergent discursive move (see Moldoveanu, 2009)—acted as a disguised retort to critical upward communication. While retorts typically are characterized as sharp or angry responses, the euphemism "horsing around" operated much differently. Rather than responding to subordinates' accusations of sexual abuse with outright denials, threats or reprimands to subordinates, or attempts to recruit subordinates into a deliberate cover-up, euphemism was a calm and quiet response that silenced dissent by creating an illusion of care and concern. Specifically, Penn State leaders were able to listen to

McQueary, acknowledge their "shared understanding," and assure him they were working to fix the problem. Put another way, euphemism was a systematically distorted communication that enabled leaders to "listen to, act on, and speak about" *something* (i.e., stopping boisterous play) without having to listen to, speak about, and act on the high-stakes, ethically-laden *something* (i.e., criminal sexual conduct perpetrated against minors). Therefore, they created a reasonable belief that McQueary's expression of critical upward communication was well-received. As such, there was no apparent need on McQueary's part to pursue further internal dissent or whistle-blowing (Baron, 2013; Gutierrez & McLaren, 2012; Kassing, 2011), thereby halting any further critical upward communication.

Contributions and Future Directions

In this study, we heeded MacKenzie's (2000) call to place language at the center of the study of organizational ethics. In addition to the insights we offered into understanding more fully the role that communication played in the Penn State sexual abuse scandal, we have made contributions to euphemism research more broadly. The core contributions center on organizational euphemism, which remains a largely understudied topic (see Stein, 1998). For each contribution, we identify a set of questions to shape future research directions.

First, we demonstrate some of the unique effects of organizational euphemism, particularly with regard to organizational ethics. Previous research has shown that euphemism use can impair ethical decision-making by framing an issue in more palatable terms, by encouraging mindless processing, and by providing a shield against psychological discomfort and material consequences. This case analysis provides a vivid example of those processes. Taken to an organizational level, however, there are additional effects to consider. Most notably, while euphemism may begin as a substitute term, it easily can be transformed into a metaphor for guiding organizational thought and action (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Vignone, 2012). Operating as a metaphor, then, organizational euphemism can extend its power by shaping meaning of related phenomena. In this particular case, not only was sexual abuse hidden, but the victim was rebranded as an unauthorized guest, culpability was shifted to Sandusky *and* the

victim as equal agents in wrongdoing, and the university was positioned as the true victim of facility abuse. Consequently, not only did moral considerations of the real issue fade from view, but attention shifted toward a different problem—one that could ethically justify the course of action being taken (i.e., "professional blind spots," see Weick, 1995, p. 113). Future research can address several questions in this regard. What is the connection between euphemism and metaphor across organizations? How might metaphor conceal and reveal moral considerations? What effect does euphemistic and metaphorical language have on organizational members' ability to process ethical considerations?

Second, we provide preliminary insights into the process by which euphemism moves from an interpersonal to an organizational level. To begin, while it is unclear exactly who introduced the euphemism "horsing around," it appears it was by one of the top leaders (i.e., Paterno, Curley, Schultz, Spanier), who each had legitimate power due his position in the university. Whether "horsing around" was a deliberate discursive move from the start or simply emerged, the euphemism gained traction through leaders' willing acceptance of the phrase (i.e., no evidence exists that its meaning or its appropriateness ever was questioned). From there, the euphemism was repeated in internal conversations, recorded into written records of the organization, and relayed to external audiences by public figures.

But more than mere repetition of responding euphemisms, the process hinged upon compatibility with the earliest reporting euphemisms in this case. That is, the feasibility of using "horsing around" to chart organizational action depended upon earlier ambiguity (e.g., McQueary's use of "over the line," "with a boy"). Indeed, had McQueary's report to Paterno contained explicit language (e.g., "I witnessed Sandusky raping a young boy"), the transformation of "horsing around" from interpersonal to organizational euphemism would have been much more difficult, if not impossible. Top leaders were able to draw upon a vocabulary of "horsing around" to make sense of and develop a more palatable narrative of the accusations against Sandusky (see Rorty, 1989; Weick et al., 2005). This insight into the process raises questions for future research. What other

processes are involved in establishing an organizational euphemism? Why do some euphemisms persist and others fall out of favor? Would organizational members with less power possess the same ability to introduce an organizational euphemism?

Third, organizational euphemism can become embedded into institutional memory (Linde, 1999) and provoke individuals to accept decisions made and/or set precedent for how to respond to similar events in the future. For instance, given the propensity for organizational record-keeping—particularly, but not exclusively, in large organizations—organizational euphemisms are likely to become part of the written record of the organization. In this way, euphemism can serve as an official record against which actions can be defended to various stakeholders. For instance, leaders can draw upon euphemism to justify their course of action to stakeholders, providing an account that bleaches ethical considerations from decision-triggering events. Similarly, after original decision-makers have left an organization or if enough time has lapsed to cloud individual memory, written documents can serve as an official record of what occurred. When records are imbued with euphemisms, individuals accessing those internal documents may take contents at face value without additional interrogation of the ethics of a particular decision. This type of record-keeping can have far-reaching implications, such as leading to plausible deniability on the part of upper-level decision makers (see Eisenberg, 1984; Seeger & Ulmer, 2003). Researchers should address further the connection between euphemism and institutional memory. What are the processes by which written and oral accounts of ethical decisions get embedded into institutional memory? What role do organizational records play in setting precedent for future ethical deliberation? How might written records be analyzed to evaluate ethical decision-making?

Finally, our findings provide evidence of how euphemism can function as a disguised retort to critical upward communication (see Kassing, 2011; Morrison, 2011; Tourish & Robson, 2006). There are a range of motivations as to why someone would engage in the risky behavior of expressing critical upward communication—from simply following protocol, to clearing his or her conscience, to seeking resolution to a perceived problem. Particularly in the case of the latter,

an individual likely will be looking for assurances that the situation has been resolved (or at least an absence of information indicating that the situation remains unresolved). Direct retorts such as denials of the truth of claims (e.g., "That can't possibly be true") or soliciting cooperation in a cover-up (e.g., "We count on you to keep this matter between us, right?") would be strong signals of resistance to the critical upward communication, which could incite further action on the part of the messenger (e.g., going to a higher level in the organization, whistle-blowing to an external audience; see Baron, 2013; Gutierrez & McLaren, 2012). In contrast, using a shared and uncontested euphemism allows leadership to present itself as being appropriately concerned and responsive to the situation. Just as the absence of critical upward communication contributes to leaders' inaccurate perceptions of the communication climate in an organization (Tourish & Robson, 2006), employees can be led to a similar conclusion. Leaders do not have to deny or silence concerns by stopping the subordinate from *talking*; they can collaboratively deny and/or silence those concerns by attending to a preferred, innocuous meaning. This approach prevents organizational members from persisting in critical upward communication as it appears the situation is being addressed. Future research should examine the connections between euphemism and critical upward communication. What is the relationship between euphemism and silence? How might organizational actors learn to spot when they are being silenced by euphemism? What role has euphemism played in other organizational scandals or whistle-blowing cases? How does euphemism as a retort impact decision making in organizations?

Practical Implications

There are several practical implications of the present study. Most importantly, we highlight the critical need for specific language and a cultural script for discussing sexual assaults, particularly those involving male sexual assault. The emotional uneasiness and loss for words throughout the Penn State case provides evidence of Capers' (2011) assertion that male sexual assault is "invisible, or at least unarticulable" (p. 1259). Perhaps none of these men knew *how* to put into words what they knew. More than a decade after the crime was witnessed, and far removed from the locker room where it occurred,

McQueary still was embarrassed and struggling to verbalize what he saw. This observation is in no way made to justify leaders' claims of ignorance and organizational (in)action. However, it seems plausible that if McQueary had witnessed Sandusky in the same position with a female (especially an adult woman), he may have had words to describe what he had seen, as typical sexual scripts and rape scripts position perpetrators as male and victims as female (Crome & McCabe, 2001). Perhaps he would have even had the courage to confront Sandusky in the moment as he relied on a common gendered cultural script of "saving a damsel in distress" (Phelan, Sanchez, & Broccoli, 2010). Given that naming a problem is a necessary step in identifying and responding to it, a new vocabulary—one that is devoid of sanitized clinical or legal descriptions of assault, taboo talk of body parts, and "feminized" sexual assault language—may prove helpful in breaking the silence on male sexual assault. As one example, some sexual assault survivors already are beginning to post online about their experiences of being "sanduskied" as a way to draw attention to problems of male sexual assault and silence.

Turning to business contexts, people must be sensitized to the potential dangers of euphemism and encouraged to use clear and precise language across various organizational contexts. Particularly in situations that may carry legal ramifications, euphemistic language must be abandoned in favor of specificity. Whether it is sexual assault, sexual harassment, discrimination, insider trading, improper accounting practices, or the like, organizational members have an ethical responsibility to speak as clearly as possible. This means that individuals need to find the courage to put aside personal embarrassment and discomfort when reporting wrongdoing (Jablin, 2006).

Euphemism poses even bigger challenges for ethical leadership. Leaders have an additional ethical responsibility to seek clarity. When euphemism or other ambiguous language is used, leaders cannot allow assumptions of shared meaning to suffice no matter how uncomfortable the topic. Leaders must be held accountable for asking tough questions and getting detailed information. They must learn how to handle difficult conversations by giving individuals permission (if not a mandate) to speak in clear, unequivocal terms—even at the expense

of being offensive or using dysphemisms (i.e., impolite, offensive, or disagreeable terms). They should not halt difficult conversations for the sake of relieving their own or other's discomfort. Not only could they be missing important information in the exchange, but the information that they learn from these conversations may not meet legal standards for specificity. Moreover, leaders carry an ethical burden to foster a culture where clear, unequivocal language is encouraged (see Seeger & Ulmer, 2003).

Finally, this case provides a moment to reflect upon how language and ethics are taught in university settings. Given the important role that education plays in socializing future leaders to the business world and establishing their tolerance for unethical behaviors (see Yu & Zhang, 2006), it is worth a reappraisal of how students are being taught to talk. What type of language is rewarded? What type is penalized? Moreover, in an era of political correctness and litigation-sensitivity, are euphemism and niceties encouraged, either implicitly or explicitly, while clearer but potentially more offensive words are discouraged? It would seem that professionalism and tact can be taught in such a way as to promote clarity and avoid obfuscation. Furthermore, ethics classes could include units on analyzing language use to uncover and address ethical issues that may not be readily apparent at first glance.

Conclusion

When Sandusky's charges of sexual abuse were brought to light, the media and public at large implored, "Why didn't anyone speak up?" The truth is that they *were* speaking. It was not the silence that was damaging in this case, but the words—the euphemistic words—that enabled the most harm. The Penn State sexual abuse scandal stands as testament to the dangerous, injurious, and violent effects that language can have. While euphemism is not inherently bad, it can serve less-than-noble purposes, particularly when it is used to signify problems rife with ethical concerns and hide unpleasant truths that should not be concealed. Stein (1998) warns that the trouble with euphemisms is that "we usually recognize—awaken from—them after they have done their damage" (p. 1; see also Redding, 1996). Such is the case with the Penn State sexual abuse scandal. There, the

expression "horsing around" was not a neutral word choice that merely privileged polite talk. It was euphemism that enabled unethical decision-making by distorting meaning, impeding and misdirecting efforts at corrective and preventative action, providing a cover of ambiguity to shield administrators from psychological discomfort and legal liability, and silencing critical upward communication. Ultimately, the inability or unwillingness of key leaders to speak clearly about accusations of sexual abuse had dire consequences for the university, its leaders, and, most significantly, the boys who were sexually abused for years after McQueary's report. In retrospect, it is easy to see the extent of the harm condoned, exacerbated, and inflicted by leaders' euphemistic language choices. The tragedy of the Penn State sexual abuse case should serve as an urgent and far-reaching wakeup call to pay much closer and more critical attention in everyday life to the power and consequences of language.

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Table 1
Document Data

<i>Code</i>	<i>Description</i>
DC	Commonwealth v. Curley & Schultz, No. CP-22-MD-1374-2011 & CP-22-MD-1375 (C.P. Dauphin County Pa. 2011, December 16).
CC3	Commonwealth v. Sandusky, No. CP-14-CR-2421-2011 & CP-14-CR-2422-2011 (C.P. Centre County Pa. 2012, June 11).
CC4	Commonwealth v. Sandusky, No. CP-14-CR-2421-2011 & CP-14-CR-2422-2011 (C.P. Centre County Pa. 2012, June 12).
FR	Freeh Sporkin & Sullivan, LLP. (2012, July 12). Report of the special investigative counsel regarding the actions of the Pennsylvania State University related to the child sexual abuse committed by Gerald A. Sandusky.

Note: Only documents quoted in manuscript are included in the above table due to space limitations.

Table 2
Summary of Euphemism Clusters in Penn State Sexual Abuse Scandal

Reporting Euphemisms

<i>Date</i>	<i>Personnel</i>	<i>Euphemisms</i>
2/9/2001	McQueary, John McQueary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the shower with a little boy • Something was going wrong • With a little boy
2/10/2001	McQueary, Paterno	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With a young boy in the shower • It was way over the lines • Doing something with the youngster • Some kind of inappropriate action was being taken • Horsing around
2/11/2001	Paterno, Curley, Schultz	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two people in the shower • Activity in the shower area • Some activity that was disturbing
2/20/2001	McQueary, Schultz, Curley	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the showers with a young boy • Over the lines • Horsing around • Playful • Kind of wrestling • In very close proximity behind a young boy with his arms wrapped around him

Responding Euphemisms

<i>Date</i>	<i>Personnel</i>	<i>Euphemisms</i>
2/12/2001	Curley, Schultz, Spanier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showering with one of his Second Mile youth • Horsing around • Engaged in horseplay
2/25- 2/28/2001	Schultz, Spanier, Curley	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid bringing children alone into Lasch Building • Future appropriate use of the University facility • His guests are not permitted to use our facilities
3/5/2001	Curley, Sandusky	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Did not want him to be] in our athletic facilities with any young people • Not to bring children into the shower again

Notes

1 One of the striking elements of the courtroom testimony was the precise language invoked throughout—ranging from sanitized to graphic. In their questioning of witnesses, attorneys used terms like "sexual conduct," "body positioning," "body movement," "Mr. Sandusky's genitals touching the boy," "erect penis," "insertion," and "thrusting his groin into a young boy's rear end." Some terms were used to present testimony as matter-of-

factly as possible; others for dramatic effect. However, it seems most probable that the language used to describe the assaults outside the court room was far less precise and somewhere between the two extremes of sanitized and graphic.

- 2 As a postscript to the case, Sandusky attempted to use the "horsing around" euphemism as a defense for his actions. When questioned by Bob Costas in an NBC interview, Sandusky defended himself against McQueary's accusations by saying, "Okay. We were showering and horsing around and he [the boy] actually turned all the showers on and was actually sliding across the floor and we were, as I recall, possibly like snapping a towel and horseplay" (Costas, 2011). Of course, the euphemism that could sound innocent on the surface takes on a much more insidious meaning when taking into consideration that Victim 4 testified in criminal proceedings that Sandusky would call play fighting and throwing soap suds in the shower, often which occurred as a precursor to a sexual assault, "horsing around" (CC3, p. 53).