EUPHEMISMS AND MEDIA FRAMING

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Abstract

The paper focuses on euphemisms and their role in mass media communication as a general framing device used in the organization of information, and the thematization of accounts of events and issues. Therefore, this paper analyses the techniques of euphemism creation and their various functions employed in communication.

Keywords: Euphemism, framing, mass media communication

Introduction

Media discourse is a term that refers to institutions that use electronic broadcasting, printed magazines and newspapers to address mass audiences. Mass media is a powerful one-way system of communication from few to many; and it serves as an agent to powerful groups (political or commercial, elites or classes), purveying ideologies which may conceal the reality of the structures of inequality from those who are most disadvantaged by them. Thus, the role of modern media is often associated with that of ideological framing of the picture of the world or with the use of special means and technologies of ideological domination.

Framing is a communication device which involves the organization of information, and the thematization of accounts of events and issues. Framing is a process by which a source (or an author) defines the essential problem facing a particular social and political issue or public controversy (as in: *"Aleksander Solzhenitsyn: The prophetic power and gentle touch of the man who could not be silenced"* (Time, 2008, vol.172), [the frame of sympathy, positive esteem, and admiration]). A model of framing presupposes that the message is constructed in such a way as to contain certain associations rather than others; hence the idea of associations is critical in understanding framing. An example of a message describing taxation as a way to achieve equitable income distribution would strengthen or create associations between taxes, equality and income (Simon and Xenos, 2000).The concepts of taxes, income and equality are framed together in a phrase called *"tax relief"*. As stated by G. Lakoff, taxes were understood as

what you pay to live in a civilized society and get services that most individuals cannot afford. Conservatives reconceptualized or framed taxes as useless burdens and afflictions placed on us by an inefficient, immoral and bloated government – afflictions requiring "relief". As a result, the so called *"tax relief"* is a short memorable phrase that evokes the new set of ideas about taxes (Lakoff, 2005). Therefore, framing as a powerful instrument of programming the required set of ideas and opinions in the recipient of mass media communication includes various linguistic mechanisms, which will be analyzed below.

The Concept of Frame and Framing

A media frame is a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events. The news frame organizes everyday reality and is an essential feature for news. Media frames also serve as working routine for journalists and allow them to quickly identify and classify information and to package it for efficient relay to their audiences. The framing in the presentation of events and news in mass media can systematically influence how recipients of the news come to understand these events. The formation of frames is moderated by variables such as ideology, attitudes, professional norms, stereotypes, morality, gender concepts, etc., and is eventually reflected in the way journalists frame news coverage. The other factor of framing is the type of political orientation, authorities, and interest groups. Thus, frames influence opinions by stressing specific values, facts and other considerations, thereby endowing them with greater apparent relevance to the issue than they might appear to have under an alternative frame.

As G. Lakoff argues, frames shape the way we see the world, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, and the way we act. In politics, our frames shape our social policies and the institutions we formed to carry out our policies. To change our frames is to change all of it; thus reframing is social chance (Lakoff, 2004).

Frame Analysis

Communication theory centers today at the problems of language usage of mass media discourse, which communicates with an individual directly and which is the main channel of state ideological policy representing the interests of cultural elites. Mass media communication means are instruments and objects of cultural dominance, and the mirror of ideologems, which constitute the power language to manipulate with a social conscience. Studies of the relationship between society and language, society and linguistic personality represent an object of interdisciplinary pragmatics, cognitive and cultural research, which tries to answer the questions: what

factors are defeating or revealing cultural and language diversity? Furthermore, a study of mass media discourse is an integral part of a broader method of modern sociolinguistics – critical linguistics or critical discourse analysis (T. van Dijk, P. Bourdieu, M. Foughcault, N. Fairclough, G. Lakoff, etc). The most popular method of modern sociology is frame analysis, where frame is understood as principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of theories about what exists, what happens and what matters (Koenig, 2005). The term "framing" was first introduced by E. Goffman (1974), as the organization of messages and the packaging of information. Through the use of frames, we can classify and organize our life experiences and make sense of it. These schemata of interpretation are labeled frames, and they enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify and label (Simon and Xenos, 2000). In communication, research framing is understood as organization of information, and the thematizing accounts of events and issues. For W. A. Gamson and A. Modigliani, frames are "a central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting an issue" (Gamson, Modigliani, 1989). Frame is an ever present discursive device that channels the audiences as it constructs the meaning of a particular communicative act. If a message constructs an issue, it means that it has a built-in particular association between concepts. So, framing analysis is a careful examination of the way concepts are associated within discourse.

In media discourse, frame is always the result of a deliberate process, a way to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendations. Frames as a powerful discursive cues enable journalists at times to circulate a certain picture to deceive their audience. Journalists select frames and transform them into "airtight compartments" that make complete social consciousness impossible (Koening, 2005), though they reflect ideological principles of selection in presenting the picture of the world.

Ideological Framing

Ideology is understood as a system of representation which includes semantics, accounts, narratives, images, icons, concepts, and myths. Ideology and myths, according to R. Vodak, are synonyms; they constitute systems of ideas, which pilot large power blocks in societies (Vodak, 1989). Ideologies create and propagate a secondary reality which one either has to believe in (totalitarian system of government) or may believe in (democratic system of government). Therefore, this new reality appears to be logically consistent and self-contained, and is manifested in its own language – in the lexicon with the help of euphemisms.

In dictatorship and authoritarian regimes, those in power generate a media system that supports their domination and minimizes the possibility of

effective opposition. The direct link between the control over the media and control over the society is evident. Media is in the center of struggle for power and control in any society (McChesny, 2004).

An effective means of this control for power in media discourse can be euphemisms, especially in political communication or in a discourse of politicians. Thus, the main function of the media is framing the information in a desirable ideological perspective. As George Orwell puts it, "in our time, political speech and writing are largely the defenses of the indefensible. Political language has to consist largely of euphemisms, question begging and sheer cloudy vagueness" (Orwell, 2002: 36). Political language makes lies to sound truthful, murder respect, and give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.

The language of politicians in order to convey such states of affairs in public, must consist to a large extent of euphemisms, rhetorical repression of the actual problems, empty words, nebulous half-statements, stereotyped expressions and common places. Euphemisms are periphrastic manipulation on the lexical level, and is motivated by an assumption that a change of name can also impact new and different qualities to a thing or to a person; hence euphemism is a sort of semantic camouflage (Brekle, 1989: 105) or/and an instrument of ideological framing.

Euphemism

There is nearly a universal principle in political media communication. Any utterance ought to be formulated; any expression ought to be chosen such that it conveys as much additional material as possible for propaganda purposes. The most effective strategy of propaganda is presupposition and implication as consistent parts of the semantics of euphemisms; so, the propaganda pattern of euphemism, i.e. its ideological framing, is well concealed. The advantage of this method of concealment is the reduction of a rational control over what has been conveyed. Political media communication is always two-fold. It has several levels of interpretations: an official, uncontroversial version, and behind it – a more touchy one, which should remain as far as possible, without any consequences for the responsibility of the speaker.

Euphemism is the avoidance of words which may be seen as offensive, obscene, or somehow disturbing to listeners or readers. Items which are euphemized are often tabooed (Southerland, Katamba, 1997:554). It is assumed, that there is a noticeable tendency for governments to resort to euphemisms to mask otherwise unpleasant concepts or to conceal aspects of their policy, which results in framing mass media discourse. For example, a news broadcast about the development of nuclear weapons can be framed as a story about technological progress, about balance of power between

nations, about arms race versus disarmament, or about radiation hazards. Hence, the way the story is framed can have a strong influence on people's attitudes towards the issue (Fog, 2004).

Related to the theme of shaping of ideology via language, Dwight Bolinger identified three characteristic processes of semantics: euphemisms (downplaying one's own aggression); dysphemisms (exaggerating the bad qualities of one's opponents); and mystification (the use of jargon to conceal certain activities) (Bolinger, 1980). Examples of a wide use of euphemisms can be found in media discourse of the world press today in the context of the coverage of military actions in Iraq or Afghanistan, e.g. *mistreatment; slap on the face; interrogation techniques; forbidden techniques* (=as torture of insurgents); *people who want to hurt us* (= terrorists); *reset* (=new course in international relations), etc.

Dysphemisms can be represented by the following expressions: *the junta* (=the Burma's dictators);

Mystifications: *collateral losses* (= civilian casualties); *neutralize* (=kill); *Afgan surge* (=Afgan war), etc.

Researchers stated that euphemization is a central dominating process of modern communication, and it notes a stable preference of speakers to use euphemisms in their discourse. In mass media communication and in political discourse especially, they state the opposite process – the abundance of dysphemisms – jargonization, the usage of rude and vulgar words, the increase of verbal aggression and invective terms with pejorative connotations. Linguists notice today a paradoxical wish of people declaring their openness and sincerity to use euphemisms, as a result of their tendency in decorating which is a powerful stimulus of language reforms.

Euphemization appeared at the first stages of language history and serves as an illustration of mythological thinking of man. In the frame of this thinking, sacral objects were often associated with their names and were tabooed, and this requires their implicit nomination, the appearance of periphrastic expressions or euphemisms. This approach to taboo words is still present today in Christian cultures where instead of God's name, euphemisms can be used to depict God's name (*by Jove* - referring to Jehovah); *by jingo* (by Jesus); *Cripes* (Christ); *Jiminy* (Christ); or instead of devil's name – *Old Harry, Old Nick, Old Gentleman, Old Gooseberry, Prince of Darkness,* etc.).

Also, there are several reasons of euphemization in religion: religious reverence, fear to offend, to show disrespect; ascribing magic power to a nominative unit and as a result – to avoid direct nomination of negative objects, evil gods and forces. As D. Crystal argues, the usage of taboo word can lead to a variety of sayings, practices, and responses. "The mention of a devil or uncertain spirit can evoke a verbal or physical reaction, such as a

divine invocation, or the sign of the cross. An obscenity can be the cause of shocked recrimination, physical violence, or legal action (as in the trial over the publication of the unexpurgated D.H. Lawrence novel "Lady Chatterley's Lover" (Crystal, 1997: 8)". A similar situation was described in books about Harry Potter, where the name of evil magician – Lord Voldermort   is tabooed; instead a euphemistic expression was used – *He who must not be named* or *You-Know-Who*. Therefore, only fear over the word reinforces the fear over the object.

Euphemization is closely associated with the other semantic phenomenon – disinformation, which can be defined as a deliberate deformation of truth or "a deliberate veiling of the truth" (Galperine, 1977: 175). Such expressions such as *'free enterprisers'*(instead of capitalists), *'profit'* (instead of savings), *'the building up of labour reserves'* (unemployment), *'dismissal'* (discharge, firing) can be interpreted only as a disinformation rather than euphemisms, because these names are not intended to give the referents their true names, but rather to distort the truth. The above expressions serve this purpose. Comparing these word-combinations with real euphemisms, like *a four-letter word* (=an obscenity); or *a woman of a certain type* (= a prostitute); *to glow* (= to sweat), all of which bring to our mind the other word and the referents (Op.cit.). One and the same semantic process – meiosis can underlie both in euphemization and distortion of the truth, disinformation, cp. *'pretty-plus girls' size* (=over large (plump, fat) girls' size); and *Chernobyl accident* (=Chernobyl catastrophe). A politician who calls a nuclear catastrophe as an accident can be accused of lying, but a person who called a girl pretty-plus size instead of plump or fat is hardly a liar. Thus, euphemization and disinformation (lie, distortion, and deceit) are opposed in their communicative functions and cannot be united in one group of nomination. If we have the slightest interest in the maintenance of our society, we must be aware of what strategies and mechanisms are used daily in "war with words" which is going on everywhere and in media communication per se, and what interests and ideologies underlie the constant deceptions and lies of our life.

Functions of Euphemisms

Euphemisms can be characterized by various communicative functions; hence among the most common and important function to be considered are the following:

1) Euphemisms can be used to change exact names with terrifying or frightening connotations or meanings; cp. the usage of words *death, die*: *curtains* (actualizing the image of theater curtains as a logical finish of human life, delimiting two local spheres – this world and another world); *passing* (going away from this world, life); *departure; decease* (from lat.

decessus), interpreting death as leaving one place and going into another place or location, world; *defunction* (stop functioning), interpreting death as the state of ceasation of normal living functions; *quietus* (from lat. *quietus est*, as liberation from obligations); *demise* (from lat. *demittere* – to leave; *grim reaper* (personification of death); *the Pale Horse* (association with biblical personage); and *silence; sleep* (mythologization).

2) Euphemisms replace words with unpleasant repulsive referential meaning, e.g. louse, flea, bug – *parasite, insect.*

3) Euphemisms can name things or phenomena which at this very epoch are considered impolite, indecent, and unsocial. They are mostly restricted to the sphere of body functions, sexuality, nakedness, genitals, etc., e.g.: *intercourse* (= sexual intercourse); *sleep with/together* (sexual intercourse); *to relieve oneself* (=to use the toilet).

4) Etiquette euphemisms function when the speaker avoids using the direct name lest he/she can offend the listener or the third person. In this case, quite decent words can be euphemized though they can sound offensive to somebody else. E.g. speaking about a silly person one can say "*he will not invent the gun powder*"; *not very clever; his upper story is not well furnitured*, etc. Cp.: *We are in romantic terms.*

5) There is a large part of lexicon used to mild or mask the real nature of things, i.e. to camouflage the truth. A good example from Russian literature is the words *dead souls* in the novel by Nikolay Gogol, meaning non-existent people or people who died. Other examples of this group can be expressions such as: *to borrow* (=to steal); *to take* (= to steal); *the Vietnam efforts* (= the Vietnam War); *push-button war* (nuclear war); *peacekeeping mission* (=aggression); *electronic surveillance* (=illegal wiretapping), etc.

6) Socialized euphemisms are words that are used to name non-prestigious professions and jobs to heighten their status, to elevate menial or unskilled jobs, e.g.: *model* (= someone whose job is to show clothes); *sanitation engineer; waste-reduction manager* (=garbage man); *building maintenance engineer* (=janitor) (Moskvin, 2001). The post-modern society produces a multitude of euphemisms. The wish not to offend and the avoidance of even the possibility of offending goes hand in hand with this phenomenon of the modern age – political correctness (Veisbergs, 2001). The widespread character of this phenomenon was confirmed by the coinage of a new term – euphemantics.

Therefore, the principle of political correctness is associated with an unconscious reflection of social and attitudinal changes, changes to evaluation of gender roles and linguistic behavior, resulting in the appearance of gender-related euphemisms intended to reduce sexual discrimination and gender-role stereotyping. Cp. the euphemism *Lady* for a woman. As P. Trudgill observes, English speakers tell their children that it is

impolite to call or refer to someone as a woman (but not as a man). Shop assistants in Britain may be referred to as *sales ladies* (but not *sales gentlemen*). *Ladies' wear* can be found for sale (Trudgill, 1995:81). A euphemism has become necessary because of the unfavorable connotations that the word "*woman"* has for some people. This is as a result of the low status women typically has in a society, and because of the sexual implications that the word has in a male-dominated society. Another euphemism for the word "*woman"* is the word "*girl" that* can be used for women considerably older than this, and it is not unusual to hear of a group of people that it consists of say, *five men and six girls* (Op.cit). The use of "*lady"* and "*girl"* as attempts of politically correct gender-neutral language was known as trivializing euphemisms by P. Trudgill, which were later replaced by the use of even less gender-coded euphemism – "*female",* widely spreading in modern communication, cp.: *A blackened samovar stood at the far end of the corridor, opposite the cubicle of the carriage's female attendant, their provodnik: a hefty, unsmiling woman… (R. Harris. Archangel).*

A. Veisbergs states that there seem to be waves of euphemization when either a particular type of euphemism creation is heavily used or a sphere of human activities undergoes serious euphemization. Thus, real war simulated the vocabulary of the technology of illusionary entertainment, such as: *surgical strikes (precision bombing); ordinances (bombs); to hit the jackpot (to hit a big target), involuntary conversion (crash landing),* etc. Here, euphemistic use often borders on intentional blur, obfuscation and politically correct language (Veisbergs, 2001: 188).

Euphemisms in Media Communication

Euphemization is a chief technique of the American media in covering the Iraq war, when the task of the Bush Administration was to produce a *"positive stories about war"* (propaganda) (Washington Post, 12.2.2005). The term *propaganda* was euphemized for politically correct descriptions such as: *pseudo news reports; good news about war; phony news; manufactured news; and word games.* The term *word games* is an important and an objective symbol of the information policy of the government in constructing its power, as it was formulated by the Chicago Tribune journalist *"Half the battlefield is the battlefield of the media"* (Chicago Tribune, 12.4.2005). As the saying goes, the media do not necessarily tell you what to think, but they tell you what to think about and how to think about it (McChesny, 2004).

Euphemism creation techniques are similar in many languages and include the following methods:

1. Loans borrowed mainly from Latin and Greek. They are more technical and sound rather sophisticated, the meaning is not immediately apparent, e.g.: *illegal substances* (=drugs); *to micturate* (=to piss); *to rebate* (=bribe); *senior* (=elderly); *halitosis* (from lat. halitus –breath); and *the psychiatric disorder* (=love);

2.Widening of meaning – a word is usually semantically more general, and it is used to include the meaning of the avoidable term: *growth* (=cancer); *relationship* (=affair); *residents* (=prisoners); *assets* (=enemy targets);

3. Metonymic transfers: e.g.: One can often read at the fence the inscription: "*To stop here is not allowed*", where 'to stop' is a euphemistic nomination (used as a toilet);

4. Metaphoric transfers: *blossom* (=pimple); *theater of operations* (=battlefront); *weeding books from libraries* (= censorship); *Diana Charnwood's latest conquest* (R. Goddard) (=lover);

5. Ellipsis: e.g.: *lady's* (=lady's room); *action* (=military action); *remains* (=mortal remains);

6. Antiphrasis, e.g. when talking about an unpleasant smell: "*what a perfume!*" instead of "what a stink"!

7. Use of negative prefix, i.e. to use a negative prefix for softening the effect of the utterance or making it rather vague, e.g.: *underprivileged* (=poor); *disabled* (=crippled); to *disimprove* (=to make worse); *to deselect* (=to exclude);

8. Abbreviations, e.g.: *KIA* (=killed in action); *big C* (=cancer);

9. Adaptations, e.g.: *cripes* (=Christ); *gosh* (=good gracious); *Fanny Adams* (=fuck off), etc.; J. Neaman and C. Silver identified this method as phonetic distortion (Neaman, Silver, 1995), while B. Warren named this method of euphemization as phonemic change (Warren,1996); and Russian scholar V.P. Moskvin describes this method as paronymic change (Moskvin, 2001).

10. Truncation – deletion of some letters in writing, hence asterisks and hyphens can be used, e.g.: *G-d* (=God); *F**k* (=fuck);

11. Longer periphrasis, where lexemes are gaining semi-affix status, e.g.: *differently abled* (=crippled, disabled); *visually impaired* (=blind); *physically different / challenged* (= crippled, disabled), etc. (Cp., Veisbergs, 2001).

12. A deliberate ambiguity which is fully clarified in the further context is a way of creating euphemisms. Types of euphemistic nomination in this group can be: a) promoninalization, e.g.: *to go somewhere* (to the toilet room); *"Про это» ("about this"* – a poem by a Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky); b) *budding romance* (affair).

13. Deliberate incorrectness of nomination: a) *generosity* (= wastefulness); *gourman* (=glutton); *invent* (= lie); b) synecdoha; c) meiosis – change for a word, expressing incomplete action or weak property, e.g.: *to stop the membership in the organization* (=to exclude from the party); *plump* (=fat); *unclean* (=dirty),etc. E.g.: *Diana Charnwood is no blushing ingẻnue*. (R. Goddard) (= innocent); *Max's tongue may grow dangerously loose under Diana's influence* (R. Goddard) (=blurt out).

Conclusion

In conclusion of the main ways and methods of euphemization, it can be stated that euphemistic codification is based on the following principles: deliberate dubiousness of communication (metalepsis, open metaphor, patronymic change, antiphrasis); deliberate ambiguity (pronominalization, antonomasia, ellipsis, artificial bookishness), deliberate incorrectness (lie, evasion, hypocrisy, prudery and deceit (Holder, 1987); speech free from every-day, and common associations (Moskvin, 2001).

The existence of a taboo and euphemism, as stated by R. Southerland and F. Katamba (Southerland, Catamba, 1997), represent the exercise of power by dominant groups over their subordinates. Therefore, controlling what one can say is an aspect of controlling one's overall behavior. Taboos in the English language related to sex are not uniform across the speech community. Men have historically been allowed much greater freedom to use such terms in the public than women. Taboos serve to support the status quo and the existing power structure. They may help to maintain the dominance of one gender over another, the dominance of political or religious elite over the general population or the like. Since no words are inherently 'dirty' or 'offensive', it is unclear what salutary effect taboos and euphemisms have.

Euphemization as a process of ideological framing in media communication is a common phenomenon across languages and cultures. In media, stories about social problems are often euphemistically framed with a focus on people rather than principles, single events rather than themes, and are easily understandable proximate causes rather than deeper and more complex causes. This choice of framing influences the attribution of responsibility for the problems, the casual attribution, and the remedies that will be chosen to ameliorate the problems in question. The media will often find some person to blame for a problem; but without a deeper focus on the social structure that caused the problem, it is unlikely that an effective solution to the problem will be found. Media resorts to ambiguity, i.e. to euphemisms and frames. Therefore, once a particular interpretation has been applied to a conflict, it is unlikely that the media will reframe the issue.

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