

EUPHEMISMS AND DOUBLESPEAK IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

The article defines euphemisms and doublespeak and their functions in political discourse. It is clear that language can be considered as an invaluable treasure that tells very much about the world of which human beings are real masters. Through decades, people have ceaselessly enriched and diversified linguistics with many new concepts. Among them, the concept of using euphemisms and doublespeak becomes more and more common in present day language.

Key words: euphemisms, doublespeak, political correctness

Language is the glue that holds all human beings together. Without language we would have no nations, no human society of any kind. Human society can exist only because of the phenomenon of language. It is like the air we breathe—pure and absolutely essential for our survival. With language humans can and have survived, sometimes to the detriment of many non-language capable species. Language builds culture and society, as well as provides the means for survival in an often hostile environment. Euphemisms and doublespeak are of crucial interest in our everyday life and reality, as they are widely spread and used in every sphere of social, political and institutional life.

The word euphemism comes from the Greek word *εὐφημία* (*euphemia*), meaning “the use of words of good omen”, which in turn is derived from the Greek root-words *eû* (*εὐ*), “good, well” and *phēmē* (*φήμη*) “prophetic speech; rumour, talk”. Etymologically, the eupheme is the opposite of the blaspheme “evil-speaking.”

The term euphemism itself was used as a euphemism by the ancient Greeks, meaning “to keep a holy silence” (speaking well by not speaking at all)

Euphemism is a mild or indirect word or expression substituted for one considered to be too harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing.

There are hundreds of euphemisms used daily for to die, a few of which are pass on/away, go to one’s final rest, and depart/depart this life. Two of the most notorious euphemisms for genocide are the Final Solution and ethnic cleansing. Euphemisms that elevate the language of occupational titles include, for example, sanitation engineer for garbage collector, and those that elevate rather harsh-sounding institutional names include correctional facility for prison.

In cognitive terms, euphemisms are used when one wants to name things without calling up a mental picture of them. The aim of using euphemisms is to strike at a person’s imagination. Euphemisms do not form complete pictures in the mind, nor do they completely define an event or object. Without a complete definition, the ability to understand the true meaning of a statement is obscured. Though euphemizing is now an accepted and established practice, it has acquired a dubious connotation in light of its tendency to deliberately disguise actual meanings of words in political discourse.

Euphemisms are common in job titles; some jobs have complicated titles that

1 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euphemism>

2 <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/euphemism>

make them sound more impressive than the common names would imply. For example, window washer–vision clearance engineer, lorry driver– logistics manager, plumber–fluid transfer engineer, substitute teacher–teacher on call, etc.

Many of these euphemisms may include words such as engineer, though in fact the people who do the job are not accredited in engineering. Extreme cases, such as sanitation engineer for janitor, or vision clearance engineer for window cleaner, are cited humorously more often than they are used seriously. Less extreme cases, such as custodian for janitor or administrative assistant for secretary, are considered more terms of respect than euphemisms.

The war on terror has brought a number of euphemisms intended to blur legal boundaries to justify illegal treatment of American citizens or detainees from other nations. Among them are unlawful combatants or enemy combatants rather than prisoners of war or criminals. The former terms offer none of the basic protections democratic nations have come to expect from their governments while the traditional titles bring with them certain rules and standards governing human treatment.

William Lutz, an English professor at Rutgers University, a champion of rhetorical canons and the art of clear writing across numerous discourses, focuses his work on ethical considerations in using euphemisms, what he calls “the morality of rhetoric.” Lutz defines euphemisms as inoffensive or positive words (or phrases) we use to soften a harsh, unpleasant or distasteful reality . He makes an immediate distinction between euphemisms proper and doublespeak: “When a euphemism is used to deceive, it becomes doublespeak.” The sole purpose of doublespeak is “to make the unreasonable seem reasonable, the blamed seem blameless, the powerless seem powerful.”

The word doublespeak was coined in the early 1950s. It is often incorrectly attributed to George Orwell and his dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The word actually never appears in that novel; Orwell did, however, coin Newspeak, Oldspeak, duckspeak (speaking from the throat without thinking ‘like a duck’) and doublethink (holding “...simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them...”), and his novel made fashionable composite nouns with speak as the second element, which were previously unknown in English. It was therefore just a matter of time before someone came up with doublespeak.

Newspeak was the official language used to express the ideas of doublethink.

Duckspeak has no meaning. With duckspeak it makes no difference what the subject is, “Whatever it was, you could be certain that that every word of it was pure orthodoxy...”. After all, “it was not the man’s brain that was speaking; it was his larynx. The stuff that was coming out of him consisted of words but it was not speech in the true sense; it was a noise uttered in unconsciousness, like the quacking of a duck”. With the efficient use of duckspeak, the speaker can ensure orthodoxy, which “means not thinking– not needing to think. Orthodoxy is unconsciousness.”

Doublespeak is language deliberately constructed to disguise or distort its actual meaning, often resulting in a communication bypass. Such language is often associated with governmental, military, religious, and corporate institutions and its deliberate use by these is what distinguishes it from other euphemisms. Doublespeak may be in the

1 <http://www.sourcewatch.org/wiki.phtml?title=Doublespeak>

2 Lutz, W., *The New Doublespeak: Why No One Knows What Anyone’s Saying Anymore*, Harper Perennial, New York, 1997, 55p

3 <http://www.answers.com/topic/doublespeak-2>

form of bald euphemisms (“downsizing” for “firing of many employees”, “enhanced interrogation techniques” for torture) or deliberately ambiguous phrases (“wet work” for “assassination”, “take out” for “destroy”).

Doublespeak can be classified into several different types. Being able to recognize the different forms doublespeak can take you will be able to spot doublespeak more easily.

euphemism

words that attempt to soften, hide, or distort reality by putting the thing described into a better light, making the object it describes sound less frightening, less threatening, or less offensive

Examples of Euphemisms

categorical inaccuracy or terminological inexactitude: a lie

constructive dismissal, voluntary severance, vocational relocation, or career assignment and relocation: fired or laid off the job

senior citizen or the chronologically advantaged: old

jargon

specialized language used by a particular professional, trade, or hobby group; this specialized language used in discourse with lay audiences; overly-complex terms used to impress others

Examples of Jargon

organoleptic analysis: the act of smelling something

fused silicate: glass

distributionally conservative notions: conservative economic policies

gobbledygook

many long, sophisticated words (think “gobs of words”) used in long, convoluted sentences to confuse the audience and hide the real issue of the discourse
Example of Gobbledygook

Here’s a classic piece of gobbledygook from Alan Greenspan. (It’s OK to laugh when you read this. As Lutz mentions, if we all laughed at statements such as these, perhaps the people making the statements would be forced to quit.)

It is a tricky problem to find the particular calibration in timing that would be appropriate to stem the acceleration in risk premiums created by falling incomes without prematurely aborting the decline in the inflation-generated risk premiums.

inflated language

puffed-up, important-sounding words used to give commonplace things and events an elevated, glowing appearance.

Examples of Inflated Language

negative patient care outcome: the patient died

mental activity at the margins: insanity

reutilization marketing yard: junkyard

According to W. Lutz doublespeak is language that pretends to communicate but really doesn’t. It is language that makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant appear attractive or tolerable. Doublespeak is language that avoids or shifts responsibility, language that is at variance with its real or purported meaning. It is language that conceals or prevents thought; rather than extending thought, doublespeak limits it.

As doublespeak fills the public discourse, people have become more and more hardened to its presence. Their tolerance for doublespeak has increased along with the growth of doublespeak. Even the simpler examples of doublespeak such as “sales credits” for bribes and kickbacks, “mental activity at the margins” for insanity can insult our intelligence, corrupt public discourse, and ultimately undermine that which holds people together as a nation. Doublespeak is not an accident or a “slip of the tongue”, it is a deliberate, calculated misuse of language. Lutz gives the following

1 <http://www.damronplanet.com/doublespeak/TypesofDoublespeak.htm>

attributes of doublespeak:

- misleads
- distorts
- deceives
- pretends to communicate
- makes the bad seem good
- avoids or shifts responsibility
- makes the negative appear positive
- creates a false verbal map of the world
- limits, conceals, corrupts and prevents thought
- makes the unpleasant appear attractive or tolerable
- turns lies told by politicians into “strategic misrepresentations”
- creates incongruity between reality and what is said or not said

1Chomsky noted that “to make sense of political discourse, it’s necessary to give a running translation into English, decoding the doublespeak of the media, academic social scientists and the secular priesthood generally”

Doublespeak is an effective use of language of power, the language of control, the language of manipulation. It can infect and destroy the function of language, which is communication between people and social groups. Everybody should pay attention to the quality of the language he or she uses for communication to take place. If some people or groups use their own language of doublespeak that hides the truth and misleads the receivers of the message, no honest and clear discussion can take place. Lutz notes, “...it is only through clear language that we have any hope of defining, debating and deciding the issues of public policy that confront us”.

Language is the basis of all human communication, it forms the basis of all human actions. People think, make

decisions, express feelings and thoughts on different items only with the help of language. The language people use in everyday life influences what they think, helps to shape opinions. Using language is so natural, so common, so essential that one uses it quite unaware of how it affects the way one perceives and makes meaning. 2George Orwell states, “...if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought”.

Not only can the language of doublespeak corrupt thought and affect the ability to communicate, it can also destroy relationships by deteriorating trust. Nobody can bear to be deceived by government, media, advertising industry all the time. Little by little one begins to be distrustful toward these institutions.

In the world of doublespeak, no word is used idly. Each word is carefully chosen, with its particular nuances and shades of meaning, to fulfill the mission of the speaker or writer.

William Lutz notes, “There is a difference between the “world” and the words we use to talk about that world. On the one hand, there is the world, which consists of things, processes, and events. On the other hand, there are the names we create for these things, processes, and events. The two are quite separate and distinct and in no way connected, except as we choose to connect them. Naming things is an act of the human mind, a very creative act that has nothing to do with the “real” name of anything. Any name we choose to use comes from us, not from the thing itself or from nature”.

One can call a person who sets off car bombs whatever he wants, it is his right. He can call that person a “terrorist” or a “murderer” but that doesn’t make those

1 Chomsky, N., *Necessary Illusions. Thought Control in Democratic Societies.* South End Press, Boston, MA 1989,119-120pp

2 Orwell, G., *Politics and the English Language,* published in Cooley, Th., *The Norton Templar.* WW Norton and Company, New York, London, 1997,400p

who set off the car bomb either “terrorist” or “murderer”. The use of the words “terrorist” and “murderer” tells about the political viewpoint of that people and little about the person who sets off the car bomb.

Language occurs in a situation, a context, and the context in which language occurs creates the meaning communicated by the language. As researchers have pointed out, “meaning, rather than being a thing, becomes an event or operation. We shouldn’t think of meaning as a “thing” but as the result of a situation in which all the parts interact to create meaning. As the parts change and as the relationships between the parts change, the meaning will change. Meaning is not static but dynamic. Words in one context or semantic environment can take on an entirely different meaning in another. A semantic environment is any situation in which language plays a role. A semantic environment is composed of

1. the people using the language, both the speaker and the audience to whom the language is addressed;
2. the purposes of both the speaker and the audience;
3. the language normally expected and used to achieve such purposes; and
4. the actual language used in a particular situation.

In other words, who is saying what to whom, under what conditions and circumstances, with what intent, and with what results?

There are many kinds of semantic environments: science, law, politics, war, business, economics, religion, sports, and any number of others. Each of these is a context within which people use language to do something to or for, with or against other people. When we examine language, we should look at the language in terms of the semantic environment in which it occurs, considering the relationship of the language to the situation in which it

is used.”. IDoublespeak occurs frequently when people use the language of one semantic environment in another. That’s why one should conclude whether the language he uses is appropriate for that environment or not. Lutz advises asking the following questions:

- Who is saying what to whom?
- Under what conditions?
- Under what circumstances?
- With what intent?
- With what results?

According to him “this is as good a starting point as any when examining language, and especially when looking for doublespeak”.

2It’s remarkable how much doublespeak we are subjected to each day. . . . the doublespeak emanating from Washington has never been more prevalent, more skillful, more insidious, or more potentially devastating than it is today. –Sal Marino

3 “Once upon a time , politicians had beliefs, they had principles, they had a vision for a better world, and these beliefs, principles, and visions prompted them to run for office. And these same beliefs, principles, and visions formed the substance of their campaigns for office. Now, however, politicians have market researchers who take polls and conduct focus groups to find out what people think, what they want, or what they think they want. The results of this research become the beliefs, principles, and visions of politicians. Politicians adjust their beliefs to the results of the polls and focus groups by using doublespeak. Thus, politicians live in two worlds: the world of what they believe and the world they want the public to think

1 Lutz, W., *The New Doublespeak: Why No One Knows What Anyone’s Saying Anymore*, Harper Perennial, New York, 1997,80-81pp

2 <http://www.damronplanet.com/doublespeak/Doublespeakiseverywhere.htm>

3 Lutz, W., *The New Doublespeak: Why No One Knows What Anyone’s Saying Anymore*, Harper Perennial, New York, 1997,151-152pp

they believe. In other words, they live in a constant state of cognitive dissonance, using doublespeak to resolve the continuing contradictions between words and actions, using doublespeak to explain and justify their actions, or to say that they didn't do what they did, or what they did isn't what we think they did."

George Orwell mentions, "Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind".

Doublespeak also allows politicians to explain away the contradiction between their words and their actions. Saying one thing and doing another has become common practice for politicians.

Doublespeak runs through the discourse on Iraq, terrorism and domestic matters to a point where it is hard to tell what is going on. Throughout the whole world politicians use doublespeak to conceal their misdeeds.

All governments use doublespeak to hide their acts of violence. The U.S. government is no different from any other. In case of the language of war, a government wants to create a verbal map that is favorable, or at least tolerable; one that will lead those who must fight, die, and pay for the war to accept the war as rational, acceptable, reasonable.

Here are some examples of war doublespeak:

- war—defense, forced disarmament
- a terrorist furthering American interests—freedom fighter
- killing the enemy—servicing the target
- kill someone— take down
- massive bombing, effects-based operation—shock and awe
- secret missions designed to "stimulate reactions" among terrorist groups, provoking them into committing violent acts which would then expose them to "counterattack" by U.S. forces— Super-Intelligence Support Activity

Nobody can imagine what consequences language misuse and corruption of public discourse will have. Language is a real and unique treasure, that's why we must pay great attention to it and the way it is being used. Knowledge is power, isn't it? Without knowledge a person wouldn't be able to realize what is going on in the world, what has been said and what remained unsaid.

Political discourses in the whole world are a panorama of doublespeak and euphemism. It is vital to understand what role doublespeak and euphemisms play in narratives of political actors, and how it affects the public .

But there is a way to neutralize this danger from political discourses by using politically correct language.

The expression "politically correct" (PC) came about in the 1970's and was intended to mean "inclusive." It referred to the use of language that would not cause an individual of any demographic (social or cultural) group to feel excluded, offended, or diminished.

Political correctness (PC) is a term used to describe language, ideas, policies, or behavior seen as seeking to minimize offence to gender, racial, cultural, disabled, aged or other identity groups. Conversely, the term "politically incorrect" is used to refer to language or ideas that may cause offence or that are unconstrained by orthodoxy.

The Political Correctness movement is an intellectual effort to use language to allow and encourage social progress. It has suffered from a great deal of ridicule and scorn, and it has also been confused by many.

The theoretical foundation of the PC movement is this: language creates categories for thought, and words can create either opportunities or boundaries.

1 <https://aggslanguage.wordpress.com/the-impact-of-political-correctness-on-language-change/>

It is very important to use a less abstract language, because in that case we use a detailed and concrete language. For instance, one can say, "I like reading" or "I like reading detective stories", in the second example it is more concrete and specific than in the first one. Language that is concrete gives more specific and complete information about the speaker.

According to W. Lutz "highly abstract language is a common form of doublespeak, especially among politicians." Revenue enhancement" is a good example of using a very abstract term to hide what is meant. The government has many forms of revenue besides taxes. By using the doublespeak of abstraction, some officials were able to get approval to build a new dump in a residential neighborhood, while other officials won approval for a new sewage plant."

Such broad usage of doublespeak can be fatal for the human beings, that's why each individual should think about how to fight back. "Doublespeak pervades our public language and is doing serious harm to our public discourse. Since doublespeak will be around for a while, you need to recognize its influence in your life. Indeed, I think it is your responsibility, and mine, as citizens in a political system that depends on public discourse to do all we can to identify, call attention to, and eliminate doublespeak in public discourse. And we can do it. The first fight against doublespeak begins with each of us as individuals. We can't look to others or to organizations such as the news media. We can't say the fight is too big for us, that the fight should be waged by people who are in a position to do something. You should never use the excuse, "I'm just a common person, what can I do?" Just keep reminding yourself, if you don't do it, who else will? And then begin.¹

Opposition to the use of doublespeak has noticeably increased since the

1970s due to mounting concern of the NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) over the manipulation of language by the government and the military in reporting and discussing the Vietnam War. Since 1974 a Committee on Public Doublespeak has made an annual award to a public utterance that is "grossly unfactual, deceptive, evasive, euphemistic, confusing, or self-contradictory," especially one that has "pernicious political and social consequences" .

While it is true that linguistically euphemisms, politically correct language and doublespeak have much in common, their purpose and effect significantly differ. The purpose of doublespeak is in fact opposite to that of euphemisms; speakers use euphemisms with the expectation that the listeners will understand exactly what is hidden behind the words, in addition to mutual understanding that the intention to use a euphemism is to avoid offence, or, in some cases, to amuse. By contrast, the purpose of doublespeak is to mislead, to blur the reality, to hide inconvenient truths. Using inflated language confuses the listeners, overwhelming them with words so that they do not detect what is really hidden behind those words. While euphemisms promote complex thoughts, doublespeak aims to limit or prevent clear thinking. So, everyone needs to pay attention to language used as a tool of manipulation; language users should be aware that it is not the words themselves, but the intentions that are good or bad. Education or experience is vital to help the speakers distinguish between naked truths and lies in disguise.

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*ՀՀ գիտությունների ազգային ակադեմիա, գիտակրթական միջազգային կենտրոն,
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Հոդվածում քննարկվում է մեղմասությունների և երկիմաստությունների ծագումը, գործածությունը և լեզվական բնույթը, որը շեղում է լսողի ուշադրությունը արգելված, բացասական երանգավորում ունեցող հասկացություններից: Մեղմասությունները հեշտացնում են անցանկալի երևույթների քննարկումը, նվազեցնում են ռասսայական, տարածաշրջանային տարբերությունների լուսաբանումը:

Միևնույն ժամանակ քաղաքական համատեքստում դրանք կարող են հանգեցնել դրամատիկ խնդիրների թերարժեքորմանը և նույնիսկ երբեմն՝ հերքմանը: Շատ հաճախ քաղաքական գործիչների խոսքը լեցուն է մեղմասություններով, ինչը օգտագործվում է ճշմարտությունը քողարկելու, թաքցնելու, ինչ-որ չափով խեղաթյուրելու համար:

Հոդվածի ներկայացման տարեթիվ՝ 21.03.2015

ЭВФЕМИЗМЫ И ДВУСМЫСЛЕННОСТЬ В ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОМ ДИСКУРСЕ

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В статье рассматриваются происхождение, использование и лингвистический характер эвфемизмов, которые отвлекают внимание слушателя от запрещенных или негативно освещенных понятий. Эвфемизмы облегчают обсуждение нежелательных событий, уменьшают освещение расовых и региональных различий.

Между тем в политическом контексте они могут привести к недооценке драматических проблем, а иногда даже к отрицанию последних. Очень часто речь политиков полна эвфемизмов, которые используются для искажения смысла или правды.

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