FUNCTIONAL FEATURES OF METAPHORIC AND METONYMIC EUPHEMISMS IN MEDIA DISCOURSE

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Abstract

The objective of the given article is to outline a range of lexical ways of euphemism formation. Research materials include euphemistic expressions of contemporary English, obtained by continuous selections from British and American newspapers. In this paper a number of units and euphemistic phrases, not recorded in the dictionary, are exposed to a detailed analysis. To achieve this goal, the following methods: logical method; definitional and contextual methods of analysis; descriptive method; method of structural and semantic descriptions; comparative method are used.

Keywords: euphemism formation, negative connotation, transference of meaning, metaphor, metonymy

1. Introduction

Complexity of the term 'study of euphemisms', which is considered to be a language universal, has been numerously noted by linguists, because this phenomenon (social by its nature) lies on the junction of linguistic and extra linguistic problems. Cultural peculiarities of any society, social changes become the basic element for usage of euphemisms and therefore specific for every language. Besides, euphemisms are often treated critically, because the study of euphemisms is thought to be an inseparable part of a bureaucratic language. This problem is considered to be up-to-date because a society tends to be more politically correct when using various language means.

Despite numerous works devoted to the problems of euphemisms, linguists still can not come to a consensus about the questions touching the definition of a euphemism, stylistic correlation, functions of euphemisms. The majority of definitions appeal to their main attribute – ability to substitute rude or foul lexis, which can cause negative emotions, such as fear, shame and disgust.

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The use of euphemisms is not new and according to Ralph Keyes "euphemisms are a function of their times" [1]. The Greek historian Plutarch wrote: "... the ancient Athenians in order to hide the ugliness of some of the things used successful, appropriate and good terms, giving these things polite and pleasant names. Therefore, they replaced *harlots* by *companions*, instead of the word *taxes contributions* was welcomed, *prison* was substituted by *chamber*." [2] The word *euphemism* comes from Greek *euphemismos* "use of a favourable word in place of an inauspicious one", from *euphemizein* "speak with fair words, use words of good omen", from *eu-* 'good' + *pheme* 'speaking', from *phanai* 'speak'. In ancient Greece, the superstitious avoidance of words of ill-omen during religious ceremonies, or substitutions such as *Eumenides* 'the Gracious Ones' for the Furies in English, a rhetorical term at first; broader sense of "choosing a less distasteful word or phrase than the one meant" is first attested 1793 [*Online Etymology Dictionary*, etymonline.com/, accessed on 24.09.2011].

2. Studying the question

There is no clear distinction between euphemisms and some other types of substitute words. Dictionary definitions do not differ considerably. For instance, in Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary the following definition can be found: "a word or phrase used to avoid saying an unpleasant or offensive word" [3], while Oxford Concise Dictionary of Linguistics gives the following definition: "euphemism is a word used in place of one avoided, e.g. offensive, indecent or alarming" [4].

Scholars find it difficult to come to an agreement when it comes to defining euphemisms. For instance, Newman considers that a euphemism is "...an inoffensive expression that is substituted for one that may be offensive" [5]. R.W. Holder, for example, accepts the definition given by Fowler: "euphemism means the use of a mild or vague or periphrastic expression as a substitute for blunt precision or disagreeable use" [6]. The definition given by Allen and Burridge refers to face and is closely connected with politeness: "euphemisms are words or phrases used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression. They avoid possible loss of face by the speaker, and also the hearer or some third party. A dispreferred language expression is simply one that is not the preferred, desired or appropriate expression." [7] We are inclined to agree with Allen and Burridge that conscious or unconscious self-censoring promotes to using euphemisms: "they are used to avoid the speaker being embarrassed and/or ill thought of and, at the same time, to avoid embarrassing and/or offending the hearer or some third party" [7, p. 49]. Euphemisms are also referred to as "loaded words" [8]. David Crystal defines euphemisms as "the use of a vague or indirect expression in place of one which is thought to be unpleasant, embarrassing, or offensive. Euphemisms are typically used to replace expressions to do with death, sexual activity and other bodily functions." [9]

Some scholars do not see any difference between euphemisms and cryptology [10]. V. Moskvin, noting the pragmatic aspect of euphemisms, believes that "euphemisms unlike cryptology represent the use of verbal encodings with the purpose to soften, veil, 'to pack' gracefully a message subject, enabling any native speaker to guess what is being spoken about. Euphemisms and cryptology can be opposed situationally. Both euphemisms and cryptology are used to disguise the meanings of words. The difference is that when using euphemisms, both the addressee, and the one who is spoken to, understand what it is spoken about, while in the case of cryptology it is not in such a way". [11] V. Moskvin also points out that sometimes "scholars are not able to differentiate euphemisms and misinformation, while misinformation and euphemisms are opposed by functions (communication purposes)" [11, p. 515]. It should be noted that "euphemisms are one of the means to implement the terms of the appropriateness of speech, as the words and expressions should be relevant with respect to the person the speech is addressed to and other participants in the dialogue, and also in relation to the situation in which communication takes place" [11, p. 842]. Neaman and Silver write that "it is often difficult to distinguish euphemisms from vulgarisms… Clearly such words as *prick, boobs* and *snatch* are vulgar. Nevertheless, when one asks English speakers if they are more embarrassed by saying *penis* or *prick*, *breasts* or *boobs*, *vagina* or *snatch* one hears surprising answers. Often the formal but direct term causes speakers more discomfort than the vulgarism. This is one of the conditions in which a vulgarism may be a euphemism." [5, p. 58]

There is no consensus in the question what can be regarded as a euphemism and what is to be considered as a dysphemism. According to the traditional point of view a dysphemism, unlike a euphemism, carries out opposite communicative intention. However, Holder notes that "one man's euphemisms can be another woman's dysphemism" [6, p. 12]. Dysphemisms are opposed to euphemisms according to the evaluation of an associative component. Euphemism unlike dysphemism improves the denotation due to a positive associate. It is worth mentioning that in the English language a characteristic feature of euphemisms, as well as dysphemisms is situational differentiation of connotations, which causes difficulty in distinguishing these phenomena. "Any word becomes a dysphemism as well as a euphemism not because it has relevant and inherent word qualities but because it is used as a substitute for another term. It is situation of communication that determines whether the word is a euphemism or dysphemism." [7] Allen and Burridge for some cases introduce the term 'euphemistic dysphemism'. Burridge gives the following example: "among youngsters the words to drop (fall), and to croak (snoring) are used as euphemisms for the replacement of the word to die (die), but in a different age group these substitutes may be perceived as an insult" [7].

Having analyzed the functions of euphemisms in different works, it can be concluded that definitions can be classified as: 1) definitions referring to softness of a form of the expression serving as a substitute of too direct unpleasant name [6, 12-14]; 2) definitions where the moral and ethical aspect,

and also social aspect of a euphemism are identified [15-18]; 3) definitions indicating vagueness of euphemisms for any reasons and the disguising effect of the unattractive phenomena [5, 19]. We adhere to the opinion that a euphemism is an element of a language, which is used instead of the direct nominee of stigmatic denotatum to soften negative associations qualified in the community or by a speaker as an unbecoming, unacceptable from the point of view of ethical norms, accepted in the society in order to avoid communicatory conflicts and to have successful communication, as well as to cover some socially unacceptable and unpleasant phenomena of reality.

For a long time careful attention has been paid to the ways of euphemism formation. The main focus of this article is to analyze the ways of formation of euphemistic lexis on the example of British and American newspaper articles. We have studied more than 100 examples some of which are given careful description in the article.

V. Moskvin considers metaphorization to be one of the successful methods of ambiguity [11]. As a way of formation of euphemistic items metaphorization is possible due to inter conceptual connection, which supposes presence of similar characteristics in the content of the concept. Metaphoric euphemisms totally correspond to the principle of politeness - besides softening the meaning of the main denotatum they can make the meaning of the original word more romantic and even poetic.

In the example "*His death came after a series of explosive newspaper interviews in which he exposed* **the dark arts** *employed by journalists at the tabloid*" ontological metaphor is at the bottom of the euphemistic expression formation [*Demagoguery, not democracy*, www.independent.co.uk/voices/ editorials/leading-article-demagoguery-not-democracy-2331909.html, accessed on 5.08.2011]. As we can see, in this case the ontological metaphor is based on the similarity of inner properties of the objects. Metaphoric transference helps to lessen negative characteristic of possible substitutes: *espionage*, *hacking*. Euphemistic unit formed by means of a conceptual metaphor is characterized by figurativeness of the lexeme *art* and gives special colouring to the utterance.

Euphemistic expression *banana skin* is characterized by humoristic-ironical colouring and lets avoid direct expression of negative evaluation: "*Middle East have increased in economic importance and the bank has shed its reputation as an accident-prone* '*banana-skin*' *bank*" [*The West must act quickly to save Libya from Gaddafi*, www.independent.co.uk/voices/editorials/ leading-article-the-west-must-act-quickly-to-save-libya-from-gaddafi-2226099. html, accessed on 26.02.2011]. In this case the idiomatic expression reflects the law of language economy because it presents an automated expression, saving our speech efforts. Usage of this expression brings figurativeness to a newspaper text and in the process of euphemistic metaphorization undesirable semes of nomination *risk* and such negative characteristics as *difficult situation*, *risk of bankruptcy* are reduced.

In the following example "*The UK economy faces major growth* **headwinds**, *notably the increasing fiscal squeeze, pressurized consumers and a slowing global economy*" euphemistic name, formed by means of the ontological metaphor, the basis of which is the similarity of outer and inner characteristics of described objects, substitutes the original expression *the various problems facing the developed world's economies* [*Bank of England faces dilemma on future of QE*, www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/bank-of-england-faces-dilem-ma-on-future-of-qe-1885353.html, accessed on 01.02.2010]. Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary gives the following definition "headwinds - a wind blowing in the opposite direction to the one you are moving in" [3, p. 220]. Negative connotation, characteristic for a deep structural concept *crisis,* is neutralized due to metaphoric transference in the result of which there appears referential uncertainty and covert implications.

Conceptual metaphor *autumn years* in the example "*Tolstoy's* **autumn years** *are turned into sitcom farce, with unspectacular results, writes Ian Brooks*" points at an elderly age and the last years of the person's life [*The last station*, www.theguardian.com/film/2010/feb/21/the-last-station-film, accessed on 21.02.2010]. Stylistic colouring and figurative effect of the expression if not neutralize but at least tend to lessen negative effect.

The process of meaning transference characterizes euphemistic notions, formed by means of a metaphoric transference: "*Diplomatically, he says the business sector's first impressions of Mr. Cable have been that he is* **a good listener** *who is out and about a lot*" [*Why does the Energy Department have trouble working with normal business*, www.washingtonpost.com/business/on-small-business/why-does-the-energy-department-have-trouble-working-with-small-businesses/2013/08/13/c858498c-0105, accessed on 14.08.2013]. Semantic movement from a concrete meaning of the nomination **good listener** - *someone who gives you a lot of attention when you are talking about your problems or things that worry you, and tries to understand and support you* [3, p. 479], descends to a blurry transferred meaning. Euphemistic denomination *good listener* substitutes the initial denomination *shy.* The speaker takes into consideration the fact how appropriate the speech is for the situation and the usage of a euphemism is conditioned by the adaptation of speech means to the aims of communication.

Thanks to a complex associative-semantic structure and ability to substitute textual description, a metaphor has a euphemistic function and lessens negative characteristics of nomination: "*<You have to know how to be sexually excited and to help each other. And you have to be ready for the time I need your* **comfort***. This is your* **mission***. This is how you* **abide the law***>, he solemnly informed them*" [*How the wheels of this misadventure were oiled*, www.independent.co.uk/voices/editorials/leading-article-how-the-wheels-of-this-misadventure-were-oiled-2269992.html, accessed on 20.04.2011]. Euphemistic expressions substitute stigmatic *having sex.* As for euphemistic *comfort,* metaphoric transference is based on the presence of such a common characteristic in the content of notions as *being relaxed* and *free from pain*. In the above

mentioned example there is an evident appeal to: 1) physical satisfaction; 2) necessity to follow the calling, mission; 3) legal and judicial practice; 4) religious problems.

Metaphoric representation *low hanging fruits* of nomination *easy work* is neutral and makes a complex situation more tolerable: "*Mr Huhne is right to stress that energy conservation must be at the heart of efforts to bring down Britain's emissions. These are the* **low-hanging fruits** *which previous governments shamefully failed to pluck*" [*Budget 2009: Alistair Darling's great financial squeeze on the rich*, www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/apr/22/budget-2009-tax-rich-alistair-darling, accessed on 22.04.2009].

A profound analysis of euphemistic expressions shows that metonymization is a frequent semantic mean of euphemistic lexis formation. Metonymic transference is based on the inner-psychological reasons and becomes possible as a way of formation of euphemistic expressions due to associative connections on contiguity of extensional, temporal, causal character and etcetera. The following example displays a metonymic model 'a part instead of the whole': "*Should those pesky* **hoodies** *head up my way, attempt anything untoward, they wouldn't know what had hit them*" [*Reform for the wrong reasons*, www.independent.co.uk/voices/editorials/leading-article-reform-for-the-wrong-reasons-2226100.html, accessed on 26.02.2011]. Euphemistic denomination *hoodies* represents such notions as *unemployed, looters.* Renaming is based on the indication of a part instead of the whole. During the riots in London this word came to general use. Under *hoodies* people meant *opportunist consumers, anarchists, participants of riots.* Metonymic re-thinking suggests second guessing of the situation named according to one component.

Metonymic model 'a place instead of the object' allows avoiding naming of objects or events which are considered to be discreditable and obscene: "*WH Smith's wholesale arm is giving newsagents the option to refuse to stock 'adult' magazines after a campaign against the* **top-shelf** *sales*" [*The closing of the British mind*, www.independent.co.uk/voices/editorials/leading-article-the-closing-of-the-british-mind-932937.html, accessed on 17.09.2008].

Metonymic transference neutralizes negative characteristics of the initial concept *pornography*. Whereas in Greek *porne* means *prostitute* and *pornographos* used to name *prostitutes*, initially the concept *pornography* was referred to when mentioning whores. In the United States of America pornographic materials were kept under the counter while in Great Britain they were put on the upper shelves where it was impossible to see them. As a result *under-the-counter* became an American euphemism and *a top shelf* – a British equivalent [1, p. 12]. Lately the expression *sexually explicit material* became a common euphemism to name pornographic materials: "*From that data, a dossier is compiled of specific material that could be seen as dishonourable – eg, examples of racist language, mentions of drug-taking, photos of a* **sexually explicit** *nature, or references to weapon usage or other violence*" [*Cyber spies: Why one tweet could cost you a job*, www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-

and-tech/features/cyber-spies-why-one-tweet-could-cost-you-a-job-2339361. html, accessed on 20.08.2011].

Let us look at one more metonymic model: "*They may have made the appearance to lay to rest persistent rumours that the 33-year-old blonde athlete has **cold feet** about going through with the marriage, but they appeared to share the joy of the crowd*" [*Harriet Walker: 'Real women' keep their clothes on in public*, www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/harriet-walker-real-women-keep-their-clothes-on-in-public-2336998.html, accessed on 13.08.2011]. Euphemistic expression *cold feet*, formed by means of transference on contiguity, substitutes stigmatic words *cowardice* and *fear*.

Metonymic model 'shape instead of the object' is based on the emphasizing of characteristics of a described object: "*The Texan model and actress was in St Tropez, her favourite holiday venue, and the place where ten years ago she was photographed in an unflattering high-cut swimsuit that showed she had her fair **share of the sort of dimples no woman wants***" [*Talk About Travel*, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/discussion/2009/03/11/DI2009031102699.html, accessed on 16.03.2009]. ***Dimple** - a small hollow place, especially one which appears on a person's face when they smile* [3, p. 355]. Euphemistic word combination *share of the sort of dimples no woman wants* resents such negative characteristics as *cellulites, old age*. In that case the author of the article tries to avoid specification of the description, which may arouse negative characteristics, and achieves its goal by means of a generalized-abstract characterization.

The following example represents a temporal type of metonymic transference: "*At least 10000 people in New York have post-traumatic stress disorder after **9/11***" [*Friday question answered*, voices.washingtonpost.com/right-turn/2011/10/friday_question_answered_10.Html, accessed on 10.10.2011]. Metonymic transference is based on contiguity of the time character. Expression of the time circumstances instead of the fact of reality, which arouses nothing but grief, is exploited in the newspaper discourse rather often.

Implicitness is a characteristic feature of euphemistic metonymy, which leads to complexity of renewal of associative connections between a taboo-denotatum and a euphemism: "*Companies received more than £5 billion last year from the exchequer in **tax relief** for work-related training*" [*Is George Osborne losing his grip on Britain's economic recovery*, www.theguardian.com/politics/2011/jun/04/george-osborne-losing-grip, accessed on 4.06.2011]. *Controversial tax cuts* are implied under *tax relief* and a positive effect is achieved due to the presence of the positive connotation in the lexeme *relief*.

Metonymic model 'place instead of the object' can also be used to name intimate parts of a human body: "*I entered the room and he threw acid over my **lower abdomen** and thighs. The acid was burning my body*" [*A safe bet*, www.independent.co.uk/voices/editorials/leading-article-a-safe-bet-2293516. html, accessed on 06.06.2011].

Let us look at the following example: "*Ms. Angle is a Tea Party-backed candidate who defeated some more establishment Republican candidates who had sought to defeat Mr. Reid. She has struggled to explain a number of past positions, including calling for the phasing out of Social Security, discussion of "**second amendment remedies**" to deal with an out of control Congress, and coming out against extension of unemployment benefits*" [*Nevada Senate Profile*, elections.nytimes.com/2010/senate/Nevada, accessed on 10.10.2010]. Here a euphemistic expression was also formed by means of a metonymic transference. *Second amendment remedies* veil the initial law of the right to carry weapons, which brought to tragic consequences.

3. Conclusions

All mentioned above shows that the problem of euphemisms is very complex. Analyzing various ways of euphemism formation, we come to the conclusion that the language of newspapers adhere to a selective modified way of information representation. Usage of neutral formulations, in other words, euphemisms, with the aim of masking some events and actions allow to change certain properties and characteristics of a subject.

Compared to phonetic, morphologic and syntactic ways of realization of euphemistic potential, lexico-semantic way (especially metaphorization and metonymization) includes the major processes of euphemistic realization in the discourse of press. Metaphoric phrases are created to veil unpleasant features of life, as well as indecent thoughts and intentions [11, 20]. Metaphoric euphemization is mostly typical to describe such thematic fields as 'war, death, sex, financial sphere, physical imperfections'. Metaphoric euphemisms make up about 17 % of researched material, while metonymic euphemisms – about 13%. Euphemistic potential is implemented due to complexity of associative connections reconstruction between a taboo-denotatum and a euphemism. The process of a euphemism formation displays a language tendency for observation of political correctness in the English-speaking society.

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