

Ruzanna Melikyan

YSU, Chair of Diplomatic Service and Communication

ruzanna.melikyan@ysu.am

Abstract

The article considers one of the linguistic devices of the diplomatic language—euphemism—through the analysis of speeches and interviews delivered by heads of states, famous diplomats, and political figures. The analysis reveals the indispensable role of this magic phenomenon in composing speeches. It manifests how political figures and diplomats apply this effective and protective device to achieve their goals successfully and to be palatable and acceptable to the audience. The use of euphemisms in their speech indicates the coloring function of this strong and, at the same time, softening nature of this specific tool, as it helps the users to be more flexible and promote a certain character and quality of communication. Euphemism, as an alternative substitute, allows them to cover up unpleasant events, conceal aspects of the policy, or shield the public from distressing details. Hence, euphemization is an attractive, efficient, and often used linguistic tool that, in certain instances, prevails in the delightful process of modern diplomatic communication by beautifying it and preventing negative impact.

Keywords: diplomatic language, euphemism, linguistic instrument, effective device.

Introduction

Diplomatic language is a mild, lenient, coded often circumlocutory language, that depends on the circumstances. In the international society it is a tool in the to exercise in an effort to play down or minimize disappointment, offence or provocations likely to be caused by the delivery of an unwelcome message. It also helps to preserve the possibility of future communication, and reflects the mode by which diplomats both recognize each other and reason together.

In the world of intricate divergences and grave contradictions proper management of relationships between countries is of indispensable importance. In fact, implementing euphemism, is one of the most common methods in the resolution of these problems without harming and destroying the existing mutual relationships. Euphemism is a magnificent device and constitutes an essential and natural part of the language, as it stands out as a substitution for an expression or phrasing that might offend the interlocutor or suggest something unpleasant or embarrassing to the receiver, using instead an agreeable, acceptable and congenial or less offensive expression, which makes the say less troublesome for the speaker.

Euphemistic diplomatic language is prudent and cautious. Diplomatic euphemism is one of the best implementation options of the communicative function of the language. Diplomats often use euphemisms to express certain ideas which are displeasing, embarrassing and cannot be pronounced in direct terms without losing the real intention. They need to apply tactful and subtle expressions to mitigate the tense atmosphere in a given situation or avoid the intensification of contradictions and

conflicts by making their real motives and intentions acquire some vague impression. This figurative linguistic device is a politeness strategy. It adds new values to words and ideas, being affected by and at the same time contributing to the ever-changing perception of modern reality.

The etymology of the word “euphemism” comes from the Greek “eu”—‘good’ and “phem”—‘speak’. Oxford dictionary defines euphemism as “an indirect word or phrase that people often use to refer to something embarrassing or unpleasant than it really is” [Hornby, 499]. It is a pleasant, palatable and harmless word or phrase which substitutes the one that could be found offensive or displeasing. For example, “He is not poor; he is *economically disadvantaged*”, or “It’s not a lie; it’s *an alternate fact*”. Otherwise euphemism is a felicitous way of expressing something that might distress or insult someone. Illustrative definitions of the essence of euphemisms are the followings: “Euphemisms are unpleasant truths wearing diplomatic cologne” [Crisp]. For instance, “Our *active defense* will be initiated against the regime” mitigates the meaning of “We will attack them”, or “The police force is being *streamlined*” is the favourable form of “We are reducing police numbers”. In the Oxford Dictionary of Euphemisms, Holder claims that “in speech and writing, we use euphemism for dealing with taboo or sensitive subjects. It is therefore the language of evasion, hypocrisy, prudery and deceit.” [Holder] George Orwell wrote: “Political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible, thus political speech has to consist largely of euphemisms, question begging and sheer cloudy vagueness”. [Orwell]. “Euphemisms are periphrastic manipulation on the lexical level, and this manipulation 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]. “Euphemisms are motivated by a desire to choose a better or more polite way to express a given content” [Allan].

One of the existing theories concerning the functions of euphemisms is that of Velykorada. According to her classification euphemisms are divided into *concealing, conspiratorial, preventive, rhetorical, elevative, cooperative, distortive*. Whereas Burridge’s classification specifies the following functions: *protective, underhand, uplifting, provocative, cohesive, ludic*. However, in this article we will not delve into classifications, but will generally show the power and the essential role of this linguistic phenomenon in the political and diplomatic discourse.

Employing euphemisms in speech and writing can be a good, useful and effective instrument for improving communication and avoiding possible misunderstandings, conflicts and embarrassments.

Main body

In contemporary political and diplomatic discourse many diplomats and politicians resort to euphemism as a linguistic tool, as an innocent way to deal with unpleasant, unpalatable subjects to reach their political objectives through the process of persuasion and bargaining.

Composing the texts of their speeches, diplomats and political figures incorporate into them not only their extensive knowledge of the natural and social worlds (assumptions, beliefs, values), but also their knowledge of language, the power of influence of which is apparent and very strong. This feature is manifested through the magic linguistic tool of euphemism, the role of which covered in them is unavoidable, as they contribute to the richness of language. When euphemisms are applied thoughtfully in everyday situations, particularly in public or diplomatic discourse, they can support interpersonal relationships. As we know contemporary diplomacy uses discourses and practices that obscure distinctions between war and peace, between violence and humanity. These distinctions provide a prolific soil for linguistic creativity, to find new elusive, mild and gentle expressions which disguise the violent unpalatable nature of their referents.

Let us consider euphemisms in speeches of famous politicians and diplomats, the purpose of their usage and their main functions. The examples taken from public speeches, interviews, debates of famous politicians and diplomats are a good source of illustration of its use.

...I am going to unleash American energy. I'm going to repeal and replace **Obamacare**, I'm going to appoint Justices to the Supreme Court who will follow the Constitution; I'm going to rebuild our **depleted** military and take care of our **vets**; I'm going to save your **2nd Amendment**. [Trump, Jobs and Economy]

This excerpt is taken from US President Donald Trump's speech delivered at the forum on "Jobs and Economy" on September 15, 2016. As is seen in the example the President applied euphemism in his favour.

In this example *Obamacare*, *depleted military*, *vets*, *2nd Amendment* are euphemistic words and expressions. Instead of using "the Affordable Care Act", formally known as "the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA)—the comprehensive health care reform law enacted in March 2010 by the US law, Trump uses 'Obamacare' by means of the linguistic device of distortion (modification of form): the Health Care reform adopted by Barak Obama, with the intention to excite the recipients, make them accept pleasantly, and arouse their attention, as manipulation on the lexical level can also impact the recipients.

Then he applies 'depleted military', trying to mitigate the idea of "exhausted and poor" military, as it may have negative effect on the audience.

The word 'vets', the abbreviated form of veterans, sounds more caressing and shows closer feeling towards them, and is socially acceptable.

Then 'the 2nd Amendment'. It is an underhand euphemistic expression as it mystifies the idea of the utterance. 'The 2nd Amendment of the Constitution', which is on a 'well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed' could be said in a simpler and transparent way. Through this expression Trump tries to attach it a powerful stimulus.

Euphemisms manipulate the meaning of a word or phrase to make them appear more pleasant. The following example manifests the power and appeal of this felicitous tool:

Of course, **to tout** this progress doesn't mean that we're not mindful of how much more there is to do. In this season in particular, we're reminded that there are people who are still hungry, people who are still homeless; people who still have trouble paying the bills or finding work after **being laid off**. There are communities that are still mourning those who **have been stolen** from us by senseless gun violence, and parents who still are wondering how to protect their kids. And after I leave office, I intend to continue to work with organizations and citizens doing good across the country on these and other pressing issues **to build on** the progress that we've made. [Obama]

This excerpt is taken from Barak Obama's speech delivered at the News Conference on 16 December 2016, which, according to him, was the most wonderful press conference of the year at the White House. In this example *to tout*, *being laid off*, *have been stolen* and *to build on* are applied euphemistically. Replacing the verb 'to advertise', which sounds formal, by the colloquial verb 'to tout' B. Obama wants to create a positive communication atmosphere. Instead of 'being dismissed',

he uses the phrasal verb ‘being laid off’, just to mitigate the force of the utterance. Then he employs euphemistic expression ‘have been stolen’, which is the alternative to ‘have been killed’. Through the preventive function of euphemism Obama tries to alleviate the concept of death as it has always been silenced in the society. The phrasal verb ‘to build on’ which means ‘to add, to expand’, is also a manifestation of a euphemism, as we know that phrasal verbs tend to create a more casual or conversational tone, which euphemisms tend to do as well.

Another statement that illustrates the instrumental role of this device, is taken from Donald Trump’s speech made at the forum on “Jobs and Economy”, September 15, 2016.

Right now, 92 million Americans **are on the sidelines, outside the workforce, and not part of our economy** [Trump, Jobs and Economy].

Here the President describes the state of millions of Americans. The expressions ‘*be on the sidelines*’, ‘*outside the workforce*’, ‘*not part of our economy*’ are applied euphemistically by means of which D. Trump tries to create positive and advantageous atmosphere. Instead of saying directly that they are jobless, which would have a negative impact on the listeners, he exercised figurative language, which purposely avoids the direct meaning.

To show the underhand function of euphemisms, that is, to intentionally mention the topic in an indirect way, there is the application of *acronyms* that help the speakers compose their speech:

I am pleased to the support that the coalition to defeat **ISIS** has taken 100 percent of the territory once held by these killers in Iraq and Syria. [Trump, World Economic Forum].

In this example ‘ISIS’ is a euphemism. Instead of “a terrorist organization”, which would sound unfavourably, Trump applies the acronym ISIS as a polite alternative, to deliberately disguise the organization of killers. He refers to it in an indirect way, trying to understate the displeasing concept, which would disturb the listeners and lessen the impact.

Grammar, too, has its significant role in creating euphemisms. The grammatical forms of plurality and personification are looked at as methods of forming this linguistic device.

Jobs can **stop leaving** our country, and start pouring in. **Failing schools** can become flourishing schools. **Crumbling roads** can become gleaming infrastructure. Inner cities can experience **a flood of new jobs** and investment. And rising crime can give way to safe and prosperous communities. [Trump, Jobs and Economy]

In this example the grammatical form of plurality “*jobs, schools, roads, new jobs*” helps to compose a more powerful image of prosperity, while personified verbs make us think that bright and light future are at our doors. By means of these figurative structures ‘*jobs stop leaving, failing schools can become flourishing schools, crumbling roads can become gleaming infrastructure, a flood of new jobs*’, the speaker introduces the aspects of reality in a positive light, trying to colour the poor conditions of the country. We can state that euphemistic structures perform elevative function, making the speech more impressive and attractive.

Another example that manifests why politicians and diplomats turn to this mighty tool is the following:

In addition, because we have strongly capped deductions for the wealthy and **closed interest loopholes**, the tax relief will be concentrated on the working and middle class taxpayer. [Trump, Jobs and Economy]

In this example ‘*to close loophole*’ is a euphemism for ‘increasing taxes’, that performs a concealing function, as politicians find it very difficult and inconvenient to speak about tax increases because it usually causes people’s dissatisfaction, and arouses anger.

As euphemism is an instrument to safeguard the utterance, the following excerpt taken from Fareed Zakaria’s interview with Foreign Secretary Blinken shows its gentler role:

Fareed, at every step along the way—in fact, going back before the Russian aggression when we saw the storm rising, and we made sure, going back to Labour Day before the war, Christmas before the war, that they started to get on their hands **the equipment** that they would need if the Russians **went forward: Javelins, Stingers**. They have that on hand. They were able to save their country from **being taken entirely** by Russia. [Blinken]

In this example *the equipment, went forward, Javelins, Stingers, being taken entirely* are euphemistic words and expressions. By means of them the State Secretary tries to alleviate some colours of his speech. Instead of using “weapons” he substitutes it with the word *equipment*, which gives general idea of tools.

Then he applies the idiomatic phrase *to go forward*, instead of “to conquer”, to lend positive connotation to the utterance.

Instead of using “missiles or missile systems”, the State Secretary points *Javelin*: a medium-range, fire-and-forget missile for use against a wide array of targets and *Stinger*: a lightweight portable air defense missile system, just to understate his say.

The expression *being taken* substitutes for “being seized”, as it is common and palatable and sounds favourably.

It is of great importance to mention that euphemisms are essential tools not only in diplomacy and politics but also in everyday life and especially in teaching a foreign language, as they help teachers to encourage students in learning it, to solve the problem of foreign language anxiety. Euphemistic expressions and questions remove the distance between a student and a teacher and create a constructive atmosphere in the classroom. These soft and inoffensive structures help teachers in correcting mistakes, commenting on students’ answers, without hurting their feelings and undermining self-confidence. As in the following examples:

I’m sorry’ I didn’t **catch your idea, would you please repeat it again?**

Good for you, it’s a great progress, **I’m sure you can do it better next time.**

Such euphemistic expressions and questions sound sweeter and produce a sweeter setting for the listeners.

Conclusion

We have come to a conclusion, that euphemism is an important part of political and diplomatic discourse, that aims to conceal and alleviate unpopular facts or certain aspects in society. It is a politeness strategy, and plays an effective role in human communication, as it oils human relationships. This magic device is a polite, diplomatically correct phrase, which promotes success and welfare for diplomats and politicians to sustain a respectful atmosphere.

References

1. A.S. Hornby. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary: Oxford University Press, 2006.
2. Barak Obama's speech at the Press Conference, 2016, (05.02.2023), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/12/16/press-conference-president>
3. Brekle, H. War with words. In: Language power and ideology. Studies in political discourse /ed. Ruth Vodak, et. al, Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins publishing, 1989. Quentin Crisp: <https://allauthor.com/quotes/142735/>
4. Donald Trump's speech on Jobs and the Economy, 2016, (12.04.2023) <https://time.com/4495507/donald-trump-economy-speech-transcript/>
5. Donald Trump's speech to the World Economic Forum, (14.09.2023), <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/26/politics/read-trump-davos-speech/index.html>
6. G. Orwell: Politics and the English Language: 20.03.2023, <http://bioinfo.uib.es/~joemiro/RecEscr/PoliticsandEngLang.pdf>
7. Keith Allan: Euphemism and Dysphemism: Language Used as Shield and Weapon, 1991 https://www.academia.edu/59570521/Euphemism_and_Dysphemism_Language_Used_As_Shield_and_Weapon (04.10.2023)
8. Marina Ryabova: Euphemisms and Media Framing. (25.02.2023), <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/328023881.pdf>
9. R.W. Holder: "How Not to Say What You Mean". A Dictionary of Euphemisms. (18.09.2023), https://tipk.kg/wp-content/uploads/sites/432/2021/05/holder-r.w.-how-not-to-say-what-you-mean_-a-dictionary-of-euphemisms.pdf
10. Secretary Antony J. Blinken with Fareed Zakaria of GPS, (24.08.2023), <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-with-fareed-zakaria-of-gps-cnn/>

Ներկայացվել է՝ 20.10.2023թ.

Ուղարկվել է գրախոսման՝ 06.12.2023թ.