

Euphemisms in General (Monolingual and Bilingual) Dictionaries

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Abstract

The paper deals with euphemisms and their treatment in general (monolingual and bilingual) dictionaries. We give a linguistic analysis of euphemism formation (based on English material) and discuss the treatment of euphemisms in several English, Russian, German and Latvian monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. Serious inconsistencies have been noted in euphemism treatment (editorial decisions, subjective solutions in individual cases, labelling absence or inconsistency, avoiding of euphemisms). The problem of the ephemeral or transitory nature of euphemisms and its reflection in dictionaries has been viewed.

1 Euphemisms

The post-modern society produces a multitude of euphemisms. New power to euphemism production is provided by political correctness (Burrige, 1996) and various “isms” (starting from ableism and ending with weightism). The widespread character of this phenomenon was confirmed by the coinage of a new term – euphemantics (Dodd, 1962) in the 60ies of the 20th century. Numerous books (Pei, 1970; Enright, 1985; Allan, 1991) and dictionaries (Spears, 1981; Neaman, 1983; Green, 1984; Holder, 1987; Rawson, 1989; Ayto, 1993) have been dedicated to the subject.

Euphemisms are emotionally neutral words or expressions used instead of synonymous offensive, too direct or unpleasant words. Thus they deal with the ambiguous and the unpleasant. Traditionally euphemisms concentrate in the spheres connected with the human body, secretion functions, nakedness, genitals, sickness, crimes, military action, but today they actively invade new spheres – advertising, business, politics – anything “from private pleasure to public pain” (Rawson, 1981).

Like slang, most euphemisms are ephemeral (there is, however, a core set which is rather stable). One of the causes of a rather rapid change of euphemisms is that after a certain period of use they tend to acquire the negative meaning of whatever they refer to and become contaminated and cumbersome; new ones are then sought. Hence the ever changing vocabulary items for bad/disagreeable/taboo concepts (Hughes 1991:13-15). Hence, 2000 words for “prostitute” in English (Allan; Burrige 1991). This in turn affects the general usage as well, thus *intercourse* has almost disappeared from normal conversation because of its euphemistic sexual connotations.

Euphemism creation techniques involve some of the traditional word-formation types, but also present some peculiarities. The techniques are similar in most languages:

- Loans borrowed mainly from Latin and Greek seem less offensive: they are more technical, sophisticated, longer and sometimes the meaning is not immediately apparent: *to micturate (to piss)*, *rebate (bribe)*, *senior (elderly)*, *sub-optimal (failed)*.

- Abbreviations seem less dangerous or impolite: *WC (toilet)*, *KIA (killed in action)*, *big C (cancer)*.
- Adaptations (distortions) – a specific word-formation pattern of euphemization: *cripes (Christ)*, *gosh (good gracious)*, *Fanny Adams (fuck all)*, *eff (fuck)*.
- Truncation – deletion of some letters in writing is less widespread today as it used to be. Asterisks, or hyphens are usually used: *G- d (God)*, *F**k (fuck)*.
- Widening of meaning – a word (usually a semantically more general superordinate term) is found and its meaning is widened to include the meaning of the avoidable word. In extreme cases we find the complete substitution of denotative meaning: *growth (cancer)*, *relationship (affair)*, *inmates; clients; residents (prisoners)*, *assets (enemy targets)*, *manhood (penis)*.
- Metaphoric transfers: *blossom (pimple)*, *theatre of operations (battlefront)*.
- Ellipsis is used for euphemization as it transfers the meaning of the phrase onto another word, which is not directly associated with the avoidable subject: *ladies (ladies' room)*, *action (military action)*, *intercourse (sexual intercourse)*, *remains (mortal remains)*.
- Use of negative. There is a distinct tendency in many languages to use negative prefixes for softening the effect of the word or making it extremely vague: *the underprivileged (the poor)*, *to disimprove (to make worse)*, *to deselect (to exclude)*.
- Longer periphrasis, where some lexemes are gaining semiaffix status: *differently abled (disabled)*, *visually impaired (blind)*, *physically different/ challenged (crippled)*, *less developed/underdeveloped (laid-off)*.

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 (Ebo,1995): *surgical strikes (precision bombing)*, *ordinances (bombs)*, *to hit the jackpot (to hit a big target)*, *involuntary conversion (crash landing)*. Here euphemistic use often borders on intentional blur, obfuscation and politically correct language.

Thus from the lexicographic viewpoint euphemisms are either (1) specific words or word combinations having euphemistic meaning; or (2) euphemistic senses in polysemantic words or phrases from the general lexicon.

2 Dictionaries

Apart from specialised euphemisms dictionaries which are not the subject of this paper, euphemisms appear also in general dictionaries. The analysis of various monolingual and bilingual dictionaries suggests that (1) among lexicographers there seems to be no consensus on the nature of euphemisms; (2) often there is no strategy of euphemisms reflection/treatment (labelling, period of use, equivalents).

These conclusions seem to apply to several languages under investigation – English, German, Russian and Latvian, however for reasons of space, we will focus here on English and bilingual English dictionaries.

Euphemisms have not been thoroughly discussed in lexicographic literature, they are not mentioned in many books on lexicography, e.g. in Benson (1986), nor is there a separate article dedicated to them in the Encyclopaedia of Lexicography (Wörterbücher 1989).

2.1 Large-size historical dictionaries

Large size historical dictionaries, such as the Oxford English Dictionary, could document the euphemism use and timing extensively. Yet practice shows a different situation: OED actually provides very few euphemisms, and the descriptions are not always exhaustive, e.g.

- massage – used euphem. for: sexual activity. The expressions massage establishment, parlour etc. used as signs outside a building are frequently alleged to mean ‘brothel’;
- bathroom – a room containing a bath and often other toilet facilities. Hence also euphem. for lavatory;
- senior citizen – a term for an elderly person, esp. one who is past the age of retirement, orig. US. Frequently used in official communication and by the media as a euphemism for ‘old-age pensioner’.

There are numerous other terms that are elaborated without the use of the label “euphemism”, though the definitions are clearly euphemistic. These have often specialised labels, e.g.

- loins 2. – Chiefly Biblical and poetic. This part of the body regarded
 1. as the part of the body that should be covered by clothing and about which the clothes are bound
 2. as the seat of physical strength and of generative power
- possess – spec. to have sexual intercourse with (a woman)
- knowledge – sexual intimacy. Now only carnal knowledge (archaic and legal)

The problem is addressed in the Guide: “The OED confines its occasional use of the term to obviously oblique references to such things as sexual intercourse (a fate worse than death), or criminal behaviour ... or unpleasant truths... . As well as occurring as an italicized label, words ‘used euphemistically’ sometimes preface a definition involving an ironic reversal of meaning...”

2.2 Modern desktop dictionaries

Five medium size desktop dictionaries (The Concise Oxford, Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, Chambers 20th Century Dictionary, Collins English dictionary) were selected for a case study.

Generally very few euphemisms and euphemistic meanings were found to be included. This is no doubt prompted by the inability to decide on the semantic vagueness, longevity and spread of the concrete word/meaning.

	OED	Conc.Oxf.	Chambers	OALD	Collins
eff	e.	e.	e.	–	e.
Fanny Adams	e.	e.	e.	–	e.
massage (parlour)	e.	e.	–	e.	e.
bathroom	e.	+	–	e.US	+US,C
cloakroom	e.	e.	+	e.Br.	e.Br.
adult	e.US	e.	–	–	
pass away	+	e.	+	e.	e.
sleep with/together	+coll.	+	+	+	+
the remains	+	+	+	+	+
depart	+	+	+obs.	e.	–
one-night stand	+spec.	+coll.	+coll.	+infml.	+infml.
to relieve oneself	+	+	+	e.	+
prophylactic	+	+US	+US	+US	+US
member	+arch.	+	–	e.	+
posterior	+coll.	+Sl.	+	+joc.	+
rest-room	–	+	+	e.	+
love-child	+	+	+	e.	e.
demise	+	+	+	+fml.joc.	e.fml.
hostess	+popularly	+	+	–	–
intercourse	+	+biol.	+	+	+
friend	+	–	–	–	–
fallen woman	+	–	–	–	+
possess	+spec.	+	–	–	+
know	+arch.	+arch.	+arch.	–	+arch.
knowledge	+arch.	+	+arch.	–	+obs.
blessed	e.	e.	e.	e.	e.
senior citizen	e.US	+	–	+	e.Br.NZ
gosh	+	e.	+coll.	e.	e.
holiday	e.	–	–	–	–
help oneself	e.	+	+	+	+
disadvantaged	+	+	+	+	+
third-degree (treatment)	+	+	+	+	+infml.
institutionalize	+	+	+	+	+
appropriate	–	+	+	+	+
four-letter word	+	+	–	+	+
pacification	+	–	–	–	–
action	+	+	+	+	+
dehire	+US	–	–	–	–

Table 1: Traditional euphemisms in 5 monolingual English dictionaries

New euphemisms accordingly find it hard to get into dictionaries while old, archaic and rarely used euphemisms tend not to be eradicated from the following revised editions. The few euphemisms or euphemistic meanings that we encountered centred mainly in the sphere of sex,

body, bodily functions, death – thus in the traditional, not to say old-fashioned, sphere.

It should be mentioned that there are also dictionaries which do not use the label *euphemism* at all, such as COBUILD (general avoidance of labels) or Webster (College edition). This may start a discussion on what sort of label euphemism is – is it a style or register marker? Is it an evaluative label (Puschel 1989)? How valid is the term itself? It seems however important for learners. Thus, for example, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1995) (learners' type) does not give the label, but tries to suggest the connotations through the definition, e.g. *Massage parlour* – *a word meaning a brothel (= place where people pay to have sex), used to pretend that it is not a brothel.*

The Collins English Dictionary (1995) does not suggest the use of the label *euphemism*, yet the word appears in quite many lemmas. However similar words and meanings are treated differently:

- Member – *another word for penis*
- Organ – *a euphemistic word for penis*
- Tool – *Taboo, Sl. another word for penis*
- Collateral damage – *unintentional damage to civil property and civilian casualties caused by military operations.*

Finally, to produce a more exact picture, a list of euphemisms was drawn up (first part mainly containing the traditional euphemisms, second part – mainly euphemisms outside the traditional sphere). The most outstanding result of the study was that only one word (*blessed*) was characterized as euphemism by all five dictionaries. Details are summarized¹ in table 1, page 776.

2.3 Bilingual dictionaries

Bilingual dictionaries have a still harder choice. The following strategies have been registered in the choice of a translation equivalent:

1. Equivalent euphemism in the target language,
2. denotational equivalent is provided, losing the euphemistic effect,
3. transparent “fresh” euphemism is created by the compilers,
4. label “euphemism” is provided for the source word/sense,
5. euphemistic sense of the word does not appear at all. This can be accounted for either by considering the meaning not worth including because of the ephemeral character of many euphemisms, or by difficulties of translation.

The use of a target language equivalent in bilingual dictionaries also raises the question of whether a modern equivalent or a dated euphemism of that period (if there is one) or an explanatory note is given (not characteristic of bilingual dictionaries).

	Duden EN-DE	EN-RU	EN-LV	Lang. EN-DE
eff	-	-	-	-
Fanny Adams	-	-	-	-
massage (parlour)	e+	=	=	-
bathroom	-	-	-	=
cloakroom	e=	=	-	-
adult	+	-	-	-
pass away	e+	=	=	=
sleep with/together	e+coll.	+	-	+
the remains	+	+	+	+
depart	+	+	+	=
one-night stand	+	-	-	-
to relieve oneself	+	+	-	+
prophylactic	+	-	-	-
member	-	-	+	+med.
posterior	+joc.	+	+	+
restroom	=US	=US	=US	=US
love-child	e+	+	-	+
demise	+	+	=	+
hostess	e+	=	-	+
intercourse	=	+	+	=
friend	-	+	+	-
fallen woman	+	-	+	+
possess	+	+	-	+
know	-	-	-	-
knowledge	=	-	-	=
blessed	e=	-	=iron.	e=
senior citizen	+	+	-	-
gosh	=coll.	=coll.	=	=coll
holiday	-	-	-	-
help oneself	+	-	-	-
disadvantaged	+	-	+	-
third-degree (treatment)	=	+	-	=US
institutionalize	-	-	=	-
appropriate	-	+	e.	+
four-letter word	=	+	+	-
pacification	-	+	-	-
action	=	+	=	=
dehire	-	-	-	-

Table 2: The euphemisms from table 1 in 4 bilingual dictionaries

As bilingual dictionaries are often used for translation purposes of texts of different time periods, keeping them exclusively modern is not a perfect solution. The same list of English euphemisms as above, in table 1, page 776, was applied to four bilingual dictionaries (Duden Oxford Großwörterbuch Englisch, The Oxford Russian Dictionary, English-Latvian Dictionary, Langenscheidts Enzyklopädisches Wörterbuch der Englischen und Deutschen Sprache). All dictionaries use the label *euphemism*. Details are given² in table 2, page 778.

As can be seen, the rate of euphemism reflection is much lower in the bilingual dictionaries. Bilingual dictionaries, however, occasionally provided more modern and untraditional euphemisms than monolingual ones. As concerns the issue of euphemism equivalents vis a vis time period; no substantial findings were made as old-fashioned euphemisms or their equivalents (*know, blessed*) were normally not reflected.

In conclusion it can be stated that the study produced more questions than answers which suggests the problem of euphemism treatment in dictionaries deserves more attention than it has been given so far.

Notes

¹The abbreviations in the table have the following meaning:

- e word or meaning given as euphemism
- + word or meaning given without label “euphemism”, “euphemistic”
- word or meaning not given at all

²The abbreviations in the table have the following meaning:

- euphemistic equivalent given +
- non-euphemistic equivalent given =
- word or meaning not given at all –
- label *euphemism* applied e

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