

Euphemism

"Euphemism" comes from the Greek for "fair speech." A good definition borrowed from a literary handbook is "the substitution of a mild and pleasant expression for a harsh and blunt one." Euphemisms have traditionally been common in subject areas that people do not like talking about directly. The most common of these involve death, sex, and bodily functions. Some examples:

Direct and blunt	Euphemism
die	pass away, pass on, go to be with the Lord, called home, gone to heaven, departed
copulate	engage in sexual intercourse, make love, have marital relations,
urinate	pass water, number one, go to the toilet, go to the bathroom, wee wee, relieve yourself

The more uncomfortable we are with a subject, the more euphemisms we construct to get around talking about it in direct terms. Notice:

- lingerie, underwear, undergarment, undies, foundations, unmentionables, briefs
- restroom, powder room, men's room, ladies' room, water closet, toilet, necessarium
- dog doo, road apple, doggie dump, poo, horse biscuit, cow manure, fertilizer

The Bible uses euphemisms on occasion to soften the subject matter under discussion: In Genesis the word "thigh" is used as a euphemistic substitute for "testicles" (24:2, 24:9, 47:29), while "knew" (KJV) euphemizes sex (e.g. 4:1: "Adam knew his wife.")

Often a euphemism is used to make something bad sound better, and in this case, the disguise is usually deceptive or wrong.

Direct and blunt	Euphemism
murder	terminate, neutralize, put a hit on
lie	misstatement; misspeaking; plausible denial
steal	appropriate from
civilian deaths	collateral damage
whore house	cat house, house of the rising sun, massage parlor, sporting house, Turkish bath, body shop

A real problem with these kinds of euphemism is that they can be dangerous by clouding thought and allowing the users to fool themselves. For example, you certainly wouldn't want to obstruct justice, but you might be talked into "containing the perimeter of the damaging information." You would probably object to stealing

documents in a burglary, but you might be talked into retrieving vital information during a covert operation. And you certainly wouldn't want to kill your unborn child, but you might agree to the removal of the unwanted fetal tissue.

Some euphemisms are designed to protect the guilty, as when a prostitute solicits a customer. She asks, "Do you want to party?" or "Are you looking for a good time?"

Other times a euphemism is designed to prevent strong negative stereotypes from prejudicing a hearer:

Old and blunt term	New term
poor	economically disadvantaged
crippled	handicapped; physically challenged, differently abled
retarded	developmentally disabled
medical malpractice	therapeutic misadventure

Some euphemisms are used to prevent unwanted connotations:

Unwanted connotation	Euphemism
man's purse	tote bag, travel bag, duffel bag, camera case
suspect arrested	a man is helping police with their inquiries
bastard	illegitimate child, love child, child born out of wedlock, child

A particularly important use of perhaps desirable euphemism involves the economic change occurring in many countries. Faced with the failure of socialism, many Marxist countries are now adopting capitalist economic incentives and structures while desiring to remain socialist in name and theory. This creates a problem because no self-respecting socialist would ever call himself a capitalist. In China, capitalist movement is called "market-oriented reform." The Chinese slogan, "To get rich is glorious" is directed to socialists who are now able to possess the rewards of individual initiative.

In the Soviet Union, the adoption of capitalist market structures and incentives was part of **perestroika**, "reconstruction," and was referred to as "economic reform" and "liberalization."

In the African nations, the situation is even more sensitive because the hated word "capitalism" is associated with the colonial oppressors (usually the Dutch or English) who ruled the now-independent nations for so long. To turn from socialism to capitalism would sound too much like a return to colonialism. So the introduction of capitalism must be under names like "market incentives," "family businesses," and so forth.

The point is that without the use of these euphemisms, the changes would not be permitted. As Neil Postman says, "Euphemizing is a perfectly intelligent method of generating new and useful ways of perceiving things."

It may be useful to generate several alternative terms or labels to describe any given person, job, program, system, group, or whatever, just to gain a fuller and more complete and maybe fairer picture of it.

Euphemisms, then, can be used nefariously and with evil intent, but they can also be applied usefully to break stereotypes, change fixed perceptions, and provide alternative views of things.

A real problem with euphemisms arises from the fact that since euphemisms are often created by appropriating a legitimate term, use of the term in its legitimate sense becomes very difficult, if not impossible. Further, euphemisms are sometimes understood as "secret symbols" for something bad when in fact they might not be. This problem arises from the fact that many euphemisms are inherently vague or ambiguous.

Euphemism	Meaning?
underachiever	slow learner? smart but lazy? emotionally troubled?
massage parlor	brothel? massage parlor?
damage control	obstructing justice? controlling damage?
alternative lifestyle	lives differently? deviant behavior?
unauthorized withdrawal	bank robbery? embezzlement? theft?

Even seemingly clear and precise euphemisms can be problematic because they channel our thinking along certain often incorrect lines. The term "homeless" for "people living on the street" is a good example. The implication of this euphemism is that what street people, formerly bums, need is a home, a place to live. This fact masks the fact that the homeless are really a varied and mixed population of mentally ill, alcoholics, drug addicts, beggars, and some people actually down on their luck and in need of a job and a home. Many street people refuse to go to shelters or homes, so simply thinking of them as homeless is deceptive. The old term for these people, bums, is similarly deceptive because it lumps them all together into the category of lazy, shiftless people, almost deserving society's neglect.

Most people catch on to the use of euphemisms pretty quickly and grow adept at translating them back into the "real" term. Thus, the euphemism itself takes on the bad connotations of the bad word it was intended to replace. When this happens, another euphemism must be found:

mad....crazy....insane....deranged....mentally ill
 poor.....underdeveloped....developing....emergent
 prison....penal institution....correctional facility....rehabilitation center
 drunk....alcoholic....problem drinker
 used car....pre-owned car....experienced automobile....resale

When you come across a euphemism, then, ask whether it is appropriately or inappropriately used, whether it hides some fact that should not be hidden or helpfully changes perception toward a stereotype, or simply

provides an alternative view. No single attitude toward such usages can be adopted because cases and usages differ.

Other euphemisms for examining:

safety-related occurrence	accident
incomplete success	failure
fiscal underachievers	poor people
non-goal oriented member of society	street person, bum
downsizing personnel	firing employees
media courier	paper boy
organoleptic analysis	to smell something
career associate scanning professional	grocery check-out clerk

And compare some of these alternative ways of expressing and thinking about something:

dismissed... fired
 rental consultant...apartment manager
 real estate associate...real estate salesman
 product representative...salesman
 maintenance engineer...custodian...janitor
 senior citizen...old person...prime timer
 old age...golden years
 automotive technician...auto mechanic
 animal control officer...dog catcher (does more than catch dogs)
 table attendant...server...waiter
 financial aid...unemployment compensation...welfare
 valet...parking lot attendant
 chauffeur...driver
 chef...cook
 beautician...hair dresser...hair stylist
 sexually active...promiscuous...sleep around...fornicator...slut
 has an open marriage...commits adultery
 roommate...cohabitant...POSSLQ...live-in lover...mistress
 quiet...shy
 perspire...sweat...glow...nervous wetness
 strong willed...stubborn
 internal revenue service...tax collector
 takes drugs...experiments with recreational chemicals
 serviceman...repairman...service technician

Emotive Language

The fallacy of **emotive language** involves the use of words aimed at the feelings instead of at the reason. When certain words used in an argument have the purpose of stirring the emotions or getting the juices of feeling going to block an opponent's reasoning ability, then the fallacy of emotive language is committed. Many words have strong positive or negative connotations attached to them, and these words can make the hearer or reader tend to react to words instead of to the real issue behind them. The way around emotive language, of course, is to focus on the argument and not allow yourself to be distracted by words--however evocative or incendiary they may be.

It is important to note that not every use of emotionally loaded language is fallacious, for occasionally we feel strongly about an issue and want to show our joy or make our "righteous indignation" clear. The fallacy occurs when our intention is to persuade someone and when our language interferes with, colors, or substitutes for legitimate reasons. If the words get in the way of the argument, stirring the audience up to a point where thinking gives way to emotion, then the fallacy has been committed.

Occasionally emotive language will appear in conjunction with or as a part of oversimplification, *ad hominem*, *ad populum*, and the appeal to pity fallacies.

In its simplest form, *negative emotive language* is simply name calling. Consider such arguments as these:

- That plan is not only reactionary and extremist, but it's also simplistic.
- That's a communist plan if I ever heard one.
- I'll bet the Nazis believed that, too.
- It is time to discard that old fogey, outdated, anti-progressive view.
- These self-appointed little dictators are trying to force their grotesque opinions upon us.

In a more sophisticated form, careful word choice in adjectives, verbs, nouns, metaphors, and similes can be used to evoke negative feelings:

- This plan shows a naive and fanatical rigidity. Mine is much less cold and more comfortable to work with.
- We must question the promiscuous adoption of every supposed book that drops off the press and limps over here.
- Governor, do you plan to stuff the court with judges holding your own prejudices?
- This is not an argument of Smith versus Jones, but of the 20th Century versus the Middle Ages.
- There are a few resisters to . . . Keynes who do not go back to the frozen rigour of the neo-classical school. --Thomas Balogh

In addition to the use of *negative* emoters, many arguers are fond of using words which have a *positive emotive* force. Notice how easy it is to take a word standing for an ideal or concept we like and to attach it to some concept that the arguer wishes to recommend to us:

- We demand free parking on campus as one of every student's basic, inalienable rights.
- We are publishing these military defense secrets because the people have a right to know.
- Yes, we are tearing out this forest, but you aren't against progress are you?
- Hey, if I want to drink and drive, that's my freedom of choice.

Few people feel comfortable opposing anything described as involving freedom, liberation, rights, progress, justice, and so on. Many arguers successfully exploit these wonderful-sounding words to gather support for programs or candidates, even though the real issues are not made clear:

- We support an ordinance which merely reaffirms basic guarantees.
- Sign here if you support constitutional rights and human dignity.

- We are on a campaign to resist oppressive and unjust laws.
- I'm sure you will support our patriotic plan.
- Vote for me if you like the environment.
- This bill states that "truth, justice, and the American Way shall prevail forever." Don't you want to vote for it?

Among the biggest users of positive emotive language are the advertisers. We Americans are willing to spend billions of dollars to buy happiness, and the advertisers do their best to sell it to us. Brand names themselves are designed to make us feel happy, confident, modern, important, sexy, or some combination of these. Just look at what we can buy:

Cigarettes:	Detergents:
Now	Cold Power
True	Cheer
More	Joy
Lucky	Mr. Clean
Perfumes:	Toothpastes:
Tabu	Gleem
Seduction	Ultra Brite
My Sin	Close Up
Obsession	Aqua Fresh
Sex Appeal	

Advertisers also like to use ambiguous positive emoters to puff their products. Tires are a good example. The terms "heavy duty," "premium," and "four ply rating" have no standard or defined meaning, but they certainly make the product sound good, don't they?

And of course how often do you see these powerful words screaming at you from the label of some product?

NEW! FREE! MIRACLE! IMPROVED!

On its subtlest level emotive language can be used for emotional coloration in what might otherwise appear to be descriptive prose; the language can either convey the writer's attitudes--of approval or disapproval--or color by emotive terms certain objects or events. How a situation is characterized by a writer can have a significant effect upon our perceptions of and attitudes toward it.

- In the past these hot-rod hoodlums have terrorized the righteously outraged citizens of Poppy Street. -- Daily Bugle
- In the past these automobile enthusiasts have cheerfully visited the envious old cranks on Poppy Street. - -Daily Tribune

- That boring old meadow with the allergy-producing wildflowers was finally put to good use as a motorcycle racetrack.
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On the Dangers of Emotive Language

Although words exist for the most part for the transmission of ideas, there are some which produce such violent disturbance in our feelings that the role they play in transmission of ideas is lost in the background.

--Albert Einstein

A good catchword can obscure analysis for fifty years.

--Wendell Wilkie

Exercise 1

Explain the different connotations, associations, and built-in judgments in each of the definitions below.

A woman is pregnant with
a fetus
an unborn baby
fetal tissue
a pre-born child

Abortion is the
termination of a pregnancy.
the killing of a fetus.
the murder of a human being.
a simple birth control procedure
the removal of unwanted tissue

Exercise 2

Words are not neutral. In fact, almost every word has some connotative flavor to it, and as a result, almost every statement or question has some subjective slant to it. If you are not careful, someone else's diction (choice of words) will help you do your thinking for you.

In the following examples, what seems to be the attitude or view of the writer in each case? How does the choice of words attempt to sway you?

- A. After plummeting ten points during the course of the morning's trading, the stock market struggled back slowly during the first hour after lunch, for a net gain of sixteen points.
- B. The price of gold skyrocketed three dollars an ounce today. Yesterday it had declined three dollars.
- C. 1. The judge ordered explanation of GM's alternative engine usage.
2. The judge ordered disclosure of GM's alternative engine usage.
3. The judge ordered disclosure of GM's engine substitution practices.
4. The judge ordered the exposure of GM's engine switching practices.
- D. 1. A group of businessmen is funding the association.
2. A clique of business tycoons is bankrolling the interest group.

- E. 1. Court upholds smokers' rights.
- 2. Court favors smokers' privileges.
- 3. Court denies non-smokers' rights.
- 4. Court tramples on non-smokers' constitutional freedoms.
- F. 1. Hyperactive children to be given medication.
- 2. Hyperactive children to be drugged.
- 3. Chemical to be tested on hyperactive children.
- 4. Children to be guinea pigs in biological experiment.
- 5. Simple pill holds hope for hyperactive children.
- G. Senator Jones (announces, reveals, boasts, admits) he supports funding bill.
- H. These tires are made with (non-bouncing, sluggish, lazy, non-resilient, high-hysteresis) rubber.
- I. Shall we support the (demands, needs, requirements, requests, greediness) of the (patriots, guerrillas, terrorists, soldiers, anarchists)?
- J. Senator Smith (reports, says, claims, insists) that he knew nothing about the scandal.
- K. 1. Should students in the dorms be set adrift without the guidance of a curfew, or should they be encouraged toward responsible behavior??
- 2. Should students in the dorms be subjected to the restraints of arbitrary curfews, or should they be free to develop their own timetables?

Notice from this last example that question framing can easily be rigged to make one response psychologically much easier to give than the other. This first question asks if students should be "encouraged," and contains the positive connotations attached to "guidance" and "responsible behavior," as an alternative to their being "set adrift." Naturally the psychological force is toward encouraging them and so this question is loaded in favor of curfews. The second question is just the opposite. The words "subjected to," "arbitrary" and "restraints" all have negative connotations, while the word "free" is very positive. This question, then, pressures the hearer for a response opposing curfews. Many polls are more or less slanted (or even rigged) this way. Few people feel comfortable answering "no" to a question involving someone's "rights" or "freedoms." But notice that each of two opposite camps can be the ones with the rights or freedoms:

- My client has a right to compensation.
- And *my* client has a right not to pay unfair amounts.
- Don't you support our freedom to play music here?
- Don't you support *our* freedom to have peace and quiet?

So when you read the results of a poll, be sure you pay attention to the wording of the questions.

Exercise 3

Why would a campaign organization choose one title over another for its committee to defeat a ballot measure which would increase the alcohol tax?

- Californians for Common Sense
- Concerned Citizens Against Unfair Taxation
- The Whiskey Lobby
- Committee to Defeat Proposition 10
- Committee for Constitutional Rights
- Committee to Protect Corporate Beverage Profits
- Committee for Fair Liquor Prices
- Committee for Fair Beverage Prices

Review

Terms and Concepts

denotation
connotation
descriptive definition
stipulative definition
normative definition
persuasive definition
euphemism
fallacy of emotive language

Questions

1. Distinguish between the four kinds of definition.
2. Euphemisms can be either helpful or harmful. Discuss the circumstances that make a euphemism helpful or harmful.
3. Define emotive language and give examples of both positive and negative emotive words.

Test Yourself

For each argument, explain how the fallacy of emotive language is being committed:

1. This proposal has all the logic of a septic tank: it just sits there and stinks. The other proposal is better because it is a breath of fresh air. That's reason enough to vote for it.
2. And I hope that at the polls you will continue on that wise path you have begun here tonight. For you will be asked to vote soon, and I want you to know that in voting for me you are voting for truth, for dignity, for decency and love, for the goodness of the aspiring human spirit, moving forward into progress and greatness, meeting all obstacles as they come, conquering difficulties in the valiant struggle to establish the great American way of life we all hold so dear.
3. Ugh! you meat eaters! How can you stand to grind your teeth on a lump of decaying flesh hacked from the carcasses of dead animals? And you vegetarians! You sit there smugly chewing on the rotting sex organs of woody plants. That's what slugs do, too.