



THE IDENTIFICATION PROBLEMS OF EUPHEMISMS

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Annotation: This article examines the main approaches and criteria used in the identification of euphemisms. Particular attention is paid to the role of denotatum stigmatization, emotional evaluation, and communicative-pragmatic factors in the formation of euphemistic expressions. The study argues that the neutralization of negative connotations and the creation of socially acceptable meanings constitute key features of euphemization. Euphemisms are interpreted as dynamic linguistic units reflecting the interaction of language, cognition, culture, and society.

Keywords: euphemism, euphemism identification, euphemization, stigmatized denotatum, substitution approach, indirect nomination, semantic criteria, pragmatic factors, connotation, linguistic pragmatics.

The dynamic and multifaceted nature of euphemisms accounts for the diversity of their lexical and grammatical forms, their emotional neutrality or stylistic markedness, as well as the variability of their euphemistic potential. Owing to these characteristics, defining the phenomenon of euphemism presents certain difficulties for researchers. Linguistic studies frequently focus on establishing criteria for identifying particular language phenomena. The issue of determining whether specific words and expressions should be classified as euphemistic units has long been a matter of scholarly debate. Although euphemisms have been recognized in linguistic scholarship for centuries, a unified and clearly defined system of criteria for their identification has not yet been established. Consequently, scholars have proposed various criteria that differ in scope and content.

The diversity of approaches to the study of euphemisms indicates the absence of a unified scientific perspective on this phenomenon. While the substitution-based approach interprets euphemism in a narrow sense, broader perspectives also exist that view it as a form of indirect nomination, a means of modifying evaluative meaning, and a linguistic phenomenon with pragmatic, sociolinguistic, semantic, and stylistic dimensions. Therefore, contemporary research on euphemisms demonstrates considerable methodological diversity, reflecting the lack of a universally accepted system of identification criteria. Indeed, euphemisms should be regarded as dynamic, unstable, and rapidly evolving elements of the language system that embody distinct functional characteristics. They contribute to language development and reflect the interaction between language, culture, and society.



In contemporary studies, the necessity of a comprehensive approach to the investigation of euphemisms is becoming increasingly evident. Such an approach presupposes recognition of the interrelationship between extralinguistic and intralinguistic factors that influence the formation of euphemistic nomination within the language system. Among these factors, particular attention is given to socio-psychological and denotative-significative factors. Socio-psychological factors are associated with the ways individuals perceive and evaluate reality, whereas denotative-significative factors are explained by the renewal of reference, which leads to the emergence of new conceptual characteristics of objects in human cognition and, consequently, to transformations in the conceptual worldview.


Approaches to the study of euphemistic substitution are numerous and diverse, depending largely on the specific aspect of the phenomenon under investigation. It should be acknowledged that the most widespread approach in linguistic research is the substitutional approach. This popularity stems from the widely accepted view that a euphemism functions as a linguistic unit that replaces an “inappropriate,” “unpleasant,” or “socially undesirable” expression. This approach interprets euphemism in a narrow sense, assuming that its essence lies in the process of substitution, whereby a potentially offensive, undesirable, or uncomfortable expression is replaced with a more acceptable, milder, or contextually appropriate alternative. Within this framework, euphemisms are often classified by linguists as figurative means of expression and are therefore frequently regarded as a particular type of metaphor.

Among the proponents of the substitutional approach are the Russian linguists L.V. Grekhneva, G.A. Makarova, and A.A. Nefedova. One of the major limitations of this approach to the study of euphemisms is that it is not always possible to determine precisely which lexical item has been replaced within a given expression; in other words, the antecedent is not always identifiable. Situations in which no direct lexical equivalent exists for a euphemism, as well as cases where its meaning can only be explained through descriptive expressions, fall outside the scope of this approach. Indeed, from the perspective of the substitutional approach, virtually any word or expression may be regarded as a substitute, since it can potentially be rendered through descriptive linguistic means.

It should also be noted that scholars such as A.M. Katsev and I.V. Arnold interpret the process of euphemization as a particular form of indirect nomination, a view that is characteristic of the broader approach to euphemism studies. In the *Linguistic Encyclopedic Dictionary*, edited by V.M. Yartseva, indirect nomination is defined as “a type of expression that does not have a direct and conventional connection with its referent in speech, but is linked to it indirectly through semantic and associative relations”³.

Western scholars such as David Crystal, Robert Holder, and Hugh Rawson are likewise advocates of a broader interpretation of euphemism. Robert Holder, the author of the well-known dictionary of English euphemisms, identifies a positive evaluative orientation as one of the principal criteria for classifying linguistic units as euphemisms. Nevertheless, the

³ Yartseva, V.M. (Ed.). *Linguistic Encyclopedic Dictionary*. Moscow: Sovetskaya Entsiklopediya, 1990, p. 578.



majority of linguists emphasize the impossibility of establishing rigid and universally applicable criteria for the identification of euphemisms. In their view, it is more appropriate to discuss the characteristic features of the phenomenon rather than to seek definitive criteria. These features include the stigmatized nature of the denotatum, the creation of positive connotations, and the preservation of the truthfulness of the utterance⁴. For her part, Ye.P. Senichkina supplements the characteristics of euphemisms proposed by Holder with several additional features. Among them is semantic vagueness, which enables the mitigation of negative evaluations associated with the denotatum. She also argues that the softening of the denotatum's unpleasant impact, or its "positive reinterpretation," is not merely formal in nature; rather, it functions in such a way that the addressee is still able to recognize the object or phenomenon being referred to despite the euphemistic reformulation⁵.


Summarizing the viewpoints discussed above, it should be emphasized that a word cannot be inherently negative or inappropriate in itself. Rather, it acquires either a positive or a negative evaluative value depending on the communicative context, particularly through its association with a stigmatized denotatum. As N.M. Berdova points out, the phenomenon of nomination within the language system is directly connected with the process of "cognitive conceptualization," whereby a word is not a direct replica of an object or phenomenon but rather its cognitively processed representation. In the words of L.O. Reznikov, it is "a linguistically mediated reflection of objective reality," while I.S. Narskiy defines it as "the unity of meaning and the material form of a sign."

In summary, the degree of a denotatum's stigmatization serves as one of the principal criteria for identifying an antecedent as inappropriate, undesirable, or socially unacceptable. As a result, there arises a communicative need to conceal, mitigate, or reformulate such an antecedent in a more acceptable manner. It is precisely this communicative-pragmatic necessity that gives rise to euphemisms. In other words, the process by which a speaker indirectly and more delicately refers to an object, phenomenon, or reality associated with a stigmatized denotatum through cognitive mediation leads to the formation of euphemistic expressions. This perspective provides a sound theoretical basis for recognizing the neutralization of a denotatum's stigmatizing potential as one of the key criteria for the identification of euphemisms.

A number of scholars also identify the role of negative emotional associations as an important criterion for the identification of euphemisms. This criterion is directly related to the psychological perception of denotata marked by stigma. In such cases, speakers form their attitudes toward a denotatum by evaluating the qualities and values associated with it in either positive or negative terms. The outcome of this evaluative process may be expressed through socially acceptable linguistic forms (such as euphemisms) or through socially unacceptable

⁴ Aimoldina, A.A. On the Study of the Phenomenon of Euphemism and Its Classifications. In: Innovative Technologies in the Theory and Practice of Language and Literature Teaching: Problems and Solutions: Proceedings of the International Scientific and Practical Conference. Astana, 2009, pp. 11–15.

⁵ Senichkina, E.P. Euphemisms of the Russian Language. Moscow, 2006, pp. 77–78.



expressions, including taboo words, insults, vulgarisms, and other offensive forms of language.

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